



THE MIGHTIEST MANAGER

BOOK 01

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The Mightiest Manager

(사상 최강의 매니저)

by

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Synopsis

“What kind of hunters work without management these days?”
20 Years from the first appurtenance of monsters,
hunters need managers these days.

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Chapter 1 - Prologue – The Newbie Of Hero Management Inc.

I mean really, what kind of hunters do not work with management these days?

‘The Mass Vanishing’ which pretty much flipped the world upside down was 20 years ago and a lot of people started hunting those monsters.

Hunters, The Awakes, Knights, Mutants and recently, The returners.

All those different kinds of people are simply thrown into a big category named ‘Hunters’ right?

I know some people think it’s just a cheesy name, but people still call them that, right?

‘The Mass Vanishing’ 20 years ago, ‘The Returning’ 10 years after that and ‘Grand Ragnarok’ 5 years after...

There have been a lot of episodes. In the end, the mankind has indeed achieved the grand triumph and turned those monsters into some sort of new resources.

Of course I am really thankful for that, well, at least occasionally. Without those so-called hunters, our race could rally have seen the extinction of our own kind.

But, you know what?

Those hunters are so brilliant at talking about all those resource supplies, battle formations and their ‘special abilities’ and so on... but, They don’t even know how to make a bank account.

For real, they struggle to just make a booking for an accommodation for a holiday.

You know, have you heard what happened to that A Rank

Knight? I don't even really remember his name but he had to stand there and watch his 6 Million or 8 Million or something just burn after he got played by this fraud. They know it. They can smell it. That's why they are literally everywhere trying to bait some innocent hunters so they can rip them off.

So,

Yea I mean,

I can already tell by that look on your face. You don't know how to make a bank account right? Have you ever payed rent for your studio? The younger you got pulled into that hunting business, the less you know about the actual world outside since you get locked up in those Academies and Knight Temples forced to absorb all those knowledge about the hunt, right?

Seriously, I've even seen this female Knight who can't even buy herself a pack of tampons!

But, our management can take care of all that.

Core Zone, Dungeons, Pocket Planes...we look into all that stuff and allocate you to somewhere suitable according to your Rank.

Just follow our guideline, achieving S rank is not even a distant future.

Aether Weapon and Armour Coats? We hook you up with our contracted factories, of course. If you don't like all the fuss, we can customise it just for you.

Want to take a holiday? From flight, accommodation and day tours, we do everything for you.

Trying to rent a house? Want to get some mortgage? Why should you care about all that? Us, the management can take care of every single step. You move in whenever you want to, move out whenever you wish.

Want to retire and make a happy, cosy family? You have no idea

how much of a valuable customer you are to those matching companies.

There are loads and loads of hunters who just went full downhill and broke after they retired without a proper management. You know what they're doing now? Frying some chicken in a small, oily kitchen. We can open up any kind of trendy business just at the right spot for you. You don't even need to ask.

All this, by the most reasonable ratio of 7:3.

Of course, you are the 7. We're not some sort of a scam you know.

Finding the weapon/armour maker you can trust, finding a place to live, making a savings account for you funds, getting prepared to retirement....ain't nobody got time for all that, you know?

Spending all that time on those unnecessary stuff, when are you going to go for a hunt and explore dungeons? When are you going to have dates?

Why should you, such a valuable talent, care about all that?

Sir, have you seen that study about hunters with management using their time more efficiently up to by 80% compared to those without?

Everybody has their own job. Hunters go hunt, management takes care of all the chores.

Seriously, think about it.

What kind of hunters do not have managements these days?

All along, Kang-Joon knew this woman got something confused but he decided to listen to her anyway. After all the talk, he slowly shook his head left and right, making a small frown on his face.

"I'm sorry but I think you got something wrong."

"Excuse me Sir?"

Kang-Joon then pulled out an advertisement from his jacket. Knowing what the advertisement is about, the woman tilted her head a little bit.

“This is what I’m here for.”

“That’s manager recruit advertisement, right?”

On the piece of paper held by Kang-Joon, it definitely said, “Hero Management Recruiting New Managers”. Although it was far from looking fancy.

“Yes, you were recruiting new managers.”

“Uhhmm...you are right but...aren’t you a hunter?”

Kang-Joon made a small nod. It was evident that he was indeed a hunter, with a bracelet-looking hunting device on his right wrist.

“Oh, yes, of course I am a hunter but...”

“But...?”

“I quit.”

“hmmm?”

To Kang-Joon sudden confession, the woman behind the desk made a slight frown, as she tilted her head and looked at Kang-Joon as if he was some sort of a lunatic, Kang-Joon again shook the advertisement paper, making it flap.

“I’m going to be a manager instead.”

The woman seemed to take a fair bit of time to process what Kang-Joon just really meant. Then, she started scowling at him.

“Excuse me but...what kind of person are you?”

Kang-Joon replied with an awkward smile.

“I’m a manager wanna-be.”

Tired of Kang-Joon’s ridiculous attitude, the woman dropped her head, rolling her eyes a little bit. Suddenly lifting her head back at

Kang-Joon, she asked.

“So you know how to make a bank account?”

With a natural smile on his face this time, Kang-Joon replied.

“Nope.”

“You know how to do Word? Excel?”

“Nope.”

“Good with computers?”

“I know how to install and delete games.”

“Any second languages?”

“Well, to a point I’m not so uncomfortable with everyday living.”

“Know how house mortgage system works?”

“Well, you’re to teach me all that, right?”

“Last education certificate?”

“Quit middle school.”

Starting to get pissed at Kang-Joon’s nonchalant attitude, the woman could feel her fists slowly shaking of anger.

“So what are you good at then? If you really want to be a manager, you got to be good at something other than fighting like a hunter? Why bother becoming a manger when you can already make a sufficient living as a hunter? There must be something really special about you for me to want to hire you, right?”

Making a serious face all of a sudden, Kang-Joon then slowly lays his chin over his locked fingers on the table and says, “I’m good at bullshitting.”

“...say what?”

“All this ‘management’ stuff, I know it’s a load of shit. I tell you I’m going to be exceptional at ripping off those hunters.”

Snorting at Kang-Joon, the woman ask,

“Haha, really? Why don’t you try bullshitting me then?”

Kang-Joon makes a small smile.

“You already got fooled by me.”

“What? When?”

After a few seconds, the woman clapped her hands once like she realised something.

“Oh, so you know how to make a bank account?”

“Nope. I told you. I can’t.”

“What is it then?”

Kang-Joon takes off his hunting device, throwing it lightly onto the table.

As the bracelet stopped sliding towards the woman, Kang-Joon moves his eyes back at her and grinned.

“I’m not a hunter.”

“What?!”

“You got fooled by this cheesy bracelet. This thing is no more than a kids’ toy.”

Finally realising where she got fooled, the woman bursts out in laughter.

“Huh...Huh...so you are no more than a fraud yea?”

“Well, you told me to try bullshitting you.”

“Wow...Wow what a...yea, it all makes sense now. Of course, what kind of right-minded hunter would even think about becoming a manager instead? Ok, then one more. Try fooling me just one more time then I’ll really think about taking you in. Damn, you are pissing me off by the way.”

The woman slowly crosses her arms around her chest, tweaking her lips a little bit. She seems rather shocked that she totally got

played by this young man in front of her. Kang-Joon, noticing the look on her face, slowly grins again, as if all this is a funny prank for him.

“You get fooled by me again, I’m employed?”

“Well, I’ll definitely consider it. Don’t worry. I’m not even going to get fooled like that again anyway.”

“You have to give me your word. My bullshit is more expensive than you think.”

Looking at Kang-Joon being all confident, the woman grinds her teeth. There is no way she’d get fooled twice. Then, she comes to decide that she will really take him in if he succeeds to fool her one more time. Thinking she will not believe a single thing Kang-Joon spits out, she gives him nod.

“Ok, I will take you in. I give you my word. Now, try again.”

As soon as she says so, Kang-Joon starts grinning again.

“But you already got fooled again.”

“Huh? Wh....Wh...What are you even talking about?”

Kang-Joon picks up the bracelet from the desk then puts it around his wrist. The woman’s face slowly gets frozen as she realises what is going to happen soon.

“No...No way...”

Rays of blue light comes flashing out of the bracelet. Armour field starts to generate around Kang-Joon’s arms with a half-transparent blue light.

Soon. He pulls out a silver stick from his jacket. As soon as he presses a button on it, a sharp blade covered in subtle milky-white light pops out. The woman very well knows what this stunt means. Those object belong only to hunters.

“That is an Aether Sword....Are you really...?”

Kang-Joon smiles slyly.

“I am actually a hunter.”

“Yo...You....! Ok, calm down..calm down...”

The woman, pressing against her temples, looks at Kang-Joon.

“You...You fraud...”

“You gave me your word, right?”

The woman, given up, answers with a sigh.

“Yes...”

Whatever they say, leaving the bullshit bit to the side, it is true and evident that you need a good mouth to make it out of the management industry.

“Write your contract, you start form tomorrow.”

“Yes! I got a job!”

The woman is about to go insane with Kang-Joon’s bright smile.

“What kind of person is he really...”

Hero Management Inc. is not really that of a big management firm nor is it so small that it can be run by one or two people. The advertisement went up because they did indeed need some people to start really doing something.

And in the midst of all that, a hunter with a massive mouth gets into the company as a manager.

Chapter 2 - Quit Being A Hunter

KOOOM!

An enormous monster with a head of a cow collapses onto the floor with a short death cry. With an impact big enough to crack the stone floor, the cow-headed monster, covered in subtle silver light, took its last breath after a few agonising attempts to breathe again.

With a tense face, a blonde woman puts on her deactivated Aether sword then slowly looks around.

“Are we done?”

“Seems so.”

A black haired man, Kang-Joon, puts his Aether blaster back into its place. His face is covered with crimson blood and his clothes are looking almost like pieces of rags. Looking around with an evidently tired face, Kang-Joon murmurs.

“I know it is a tough world for the hunters to live through but they are all going off-track big time.”

Murmuring, Kang-Joon injects the Aether extractor into the collapsed boss monster’s body. Soon, with buzzing sound from the machine, silver Aether crystals flow out.

“Whatever, in the end, it’s all good for us.”

The dead men around the collapsed boss monster were actually a work by Kang-Joon and the blonde woman. Although they were exploring a B-Ranked dungeon, a boss monster is still a boss monster and it was indeed expected of them to cooperate. However, as soon as the party stood before the boss monster zone, the other men tried to murder Kang-Joon and the blonde woman as if that was their plan all along.

Of course, it was because of money. A boss monster is a rich

resource of Aether crystals and Aether crystals are one of the most valuable and expensive products of this time.

“How could a Knight even know what I’m feeling right now?”

“Huh, you know, we’ve been through a lot together. No need to be sceptical towards me.”

It was a fight against five men for Kang-Joon and the blonde woman. Avoiding the blows from the boss monster, the two succeeded to pay those men back for their betrayal and finally hunt down the boss monster itself. The blonde talks back at Kang-Joon sarcastically.

“Still a shitty thing to do to kill those hunters even when they are dirty betrayers.”

“Man, really? You really want to say that while your pick pocketing all those corpses?”

“That’s that. They still got to pay up.”

Kang-Joon carefully picks up every single equipment from the corpses with blown out and even missing heads. Then, he takes off any Aether, Cube, or Cores from them and makes sure to store them properly. After all the process, he looks back at the blonde woman. It is an indication of his intention to share the loot if she wishes, but the blonde woman shakes her head right off.

“Ah, I don’t take something from corpses. Makes me feel shit.”

“Shitty money is still money, right?”

“You mean, any money is good money.”

“Of course.”

Grinning, Kang-Joon places the loots into a box then wipes the blood off his face with his sleeves. The Aether crystal extracted from the boss gets evenly distributed among the two.

“Still got to do a funeral for these people.”

“I will.”

Kang-Joon uses the plasma explosion of the Aether crystal to get rid of the bodies. It is true that the two got betrayed and attacked first, but the other five are the ones dead now. There is no evidence to really prove their betrayal and it would have been annoying for the two to see any issues made out of this situation. In most of situations like these, the bodies normally get terminated quietly.

The surrounding of the dungeon slowly evaporates. No matter how many times one has been through the dungeons, the scenery of two divided worlds coming back together as one always seems strange and disparate.

Different to the dungeons which is always kept to certain temperatures and humidity, the outside is somewhere with scarring dry, hot winds. They are in South Africa. The winds are enough to make the blonde frown. Although there are no passengers since the area has been quarantined as a dungeon, it is not really a good scenery for others to see them covered in blood as well.

“Place like this is good in a sense that the first to come can take it all, but all these betraying assholes piss me off. Always.”

Places with weak security, in other words, places full of monsters and dungeons, there is no particular order to conquer the dungeons. However, the ‘first to conquer takes it all’ systems always results in frequent betrayals. This happens even more frequently among the hunters. Hunters are essentially just normal people with no particular power, so they have learned to survive by being even more materialistic and petty.

To the blonde’s whine, Kang-Joon just shrugs.

Due to the mass appearance of dungeons in South Africa, this region has been the centre of chaos. The news of unconquered dungeons have called in countless number of hunters, Knights and

mutants, and in the midst of that, treason has become something rather common.

The fact that it is a rather big job for those who conquer the dungeon – big enough for them to be able to take a holiday for quite some time – only encouraged all the dirty business to grow.

The blonde woman and Kang-Joon have not seen each other for a long time until this business. They used to hunt together, searching for dungeons and cores, but it is all a history now. The blonde casually gets changed in front of Kang-Joon. Although there is no one to witness, it is indeed a bold thing to do.

“Want to go for another dungeon? B-Ranked one should be fairly easy just with us two.”

“Nope. Not really feeling it.”

“Well, in that case, I guess we can call it a day here. Just contact me somehow later if you feel like it. With one more knight, It shouldn’t be too much of a problem to conquer a A class one.”

“Until when are you going to stick around with this job?”

“Until when...? Hmm....to be able to build a holiday house with a yacht in Greece...at least five more years. Maybe it’s time for me to get a management as well.”

Kang-Joon giggles. Along the process of hunting, the actual fighting part surprising does not take up that much time. It is always those boring chores that a lot of people waste their time with. It takes fair bit of time to gather a party, prepare a transportation medium especially flights and the tax claim procedure is also rather complicated for them. In fact, quite a number of people get accused of tax evasion and get jail time just because they delayed to go through the annoying tax process.

The management takes care of all the chores like that. It is true that the profit gets divided a little bit, but for the hunters, just the existence of such service is enough for them to decide to join

management. Additionally, there also have been some really good feedbacks as well. Even the blond woman, who prefers to be working alone as a freelancer, has been a little sceptical towards her standards as she witnesses her partners joining management one by one.

“I’m going to get a management myself.”

“Oh, really? Why don’t you introduce me with somewhere good?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“What are you trying to say then?”

“I’m just going to be a manger now. I’m sick of all this.”

There is no need to question why the blond woman suddenly gets quiet with her mouth open wide.

“Is it the weather? Yea, I know it is hot here. Is that why you are talking crap?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while.”

There is only so much hunters can do after quitting hunting. The blonde woman realises what Kang-Joon has in mind.

“Not going to be so easy for you to suit up and get away from swords and weapons.”

“As if hunting was any easier. What kind of mangers wear suits these days anyway?”

The blonde giggles.

“It’s better to make money off someone else’s life than my own.”

“Why don’t you establish a company yourself then? Managers still have to work for bosses and get salaries.”

“I need to figure out how the industry works first. After a few years, I’m going to then start up a company myself.”

Listening to the grand plan from Kang-Joon, the blonde shakes

her head left and right slowly with a small smile on her face.

“You’ve always been like that. Surprising people with random plans.”

“Whatever, it’s so hot here by the way. I’m a normal person, different to a knight like you.”

Knights fundamentally do not really get affected by the weather. Different to Kang-Joon struggling in the heat, the blonde looked rather calm. However, the phrase ‘normal person’ from Kang-Joon seems to have humoured the blonde woman.

“Oh well, surely, your word must be true, the great B-Rank hunter.”

“Shut up already. I am a very weak person compared to S-Rank knights like you.”

“Yea, yea, sure.”

No enhanced bodies like the knights, no mutagens like the mutants, and no psychic abilities like the awakes.

The name ‘Hunter’ is originally and exceptionally given to those with no abilities that hunt down the monsters. That’s why, according to the official rank system, B-Rank is the highest achievable rank for the hunters.

‘B-Rank Hunter’ may seem like an insult, but among the hunters, it means the one at the very top. ‘A-Rank Hunter’ does not exist neither practically, nor officially in the rank system.

Which shows, how much of an experienced hunter Kang-Joon really is. Saying that those who don’t know about the real scenes are always the one obsessed with the ranks, the blonde whines a little bit.

Moving to avoid the heat, they take place under the roof of an empty building. The blond casually breaks into the house, pulls out some beer cans then gulps it down as if it is hers. To Kang-Joon’s

look, she shrugs.

“What, never seen someone living well without laws before?”

“You mean, someone who can live only with no laws?”

The blonde giggles brightly. The residents of this area already ran away long ago and they will be back soon. A few monsters raiding their house, breaking a few windows and stealing two cans of beer should not be that of a big problem for them.

“Yea, you are right. Things have been pretty boring these days. At least there was more thrill back then.”

The monsters are being hunted, and there is obviously no fear of extinction due to the monsters. Although they may be threatening at times, they are always hunted down, then extracted to become resource.

“What kind of horrible plot...”

“Why, another Grand Ragnarok won’t really be a big issue, right?”

“You, are a psychopath.”

“Really, says the one who blew out three people’s heads with the blaster while I was taking care of one.”

The blond laughs out, and Kang-Joon reacts with a giggle as if he is really fed up with everything. With this much of experience, it is almost a must that they have all murdered someone. It is even more so for Kang-Joon especially, since he has been working with hunters for a long time.

His lies have become better, his sense to see through other people’s dirty and cheap plots has become sharp. Those things could get better by experience, but Kang-Joon was also born with those things as well. Emptying his can, Kang-Joon leaves his sit, getting dirt off his clothes.

“Leaving?”

“Leaving.”

“Where to?”

“Korea.”

“Homesick or something? Why back there all of a sudden?”

“They love materialism there.”

“So what?”

“Good place to do business. Good place to bullshitters to make through.”

Good place to resolve a lot of annoying issues with just some money. However, Kang-Joon avoids to say that last thought out loud. The blonde sighs.

“I will never ever go join your management.”

“Even with 9:1 ratio?”

“Just give me a ring. I will be right over.”

To her sudden change in attitude, they face each other and burst out in laughter.

“How was that? Already fooled on innocent customer before I even started. Don’t you think I’m talented?”

“Suck this.”

To Kang-Joon’s cheesy attitude, the blonde toughly puts up her middle finger. They have been through a lot of battles together and met each other again as they were walking down their own paths after they separated. Back in that time, Kang-Joon was a boy hunter, and she was a girl knight.

Kang-Joon has already been gone off to somewhere and can’t be seen anymore. The blonde crushes the empty beer can, tossing it up into the air and catching it.

Making through the tough survival every day, the two have now become one of the best in the industry.

One has quit being a hunter,

One remained as a knight.

She falls into a sea of thoughts, looking at the seat Kang-Joon sat on. Kang-Joon, who may seem jolly on the surface but filled with lies and façade inside, reveals himself to her. On the other hand, the blond cannot ever show Kang-Joon her sincere emotions when she meets him.

“Dishonesty. Biggest problem with me.”

She murmurs, with no one to hear.

Maybe that is exactly why she does so.

Chapter 3 - Magical Girl Of Seoul Subway

Line 2 (1)

It's been a year and a half since Kang-Joon came back to Korea.

He is now sitting in the office at his desk. On the desk lies delivered food. Nicely fried dumplings looking crispy and juicy and there is even a large plate of sweet and sour pork. Fried rice is for the boss, and Kang-Joon is holding a bowl of jjajangmyeon (black-bean sauce noodle). Although it is fair to say that the food might be too much for two, the boss is still busy nibbling with her little mouth.

Kang-Joon is not quite enjoying the current situation. He is no one but a newbie manager yet it seems like he is getting more treats than he deserves. Of course, he does enjoy having delivered food and also is very used to it, especially the Chinese dishes. The problem is not the size of the meal.

There are only two, Kang-Joon and the boss sitting in the office.

“Ah, boss.”

“Yes, Not feeling like having more?”

“No, it's not that...”

Sitting across Kang-Joon, the CEO of Hero Management Inc has mentioned that she is in her late thirties, avoiding to specify the exact age. However, from her face, it is very difficult to say that she is the CEO of this company when at most, she looks like a university student doing a part-time job during the holidays. Of course, the extreme baby face of the boss does not really impress Kang-Joon either.

But, a company with only two employees including the boss herself does indeed seem like a problem. Giving up holding himself back, Kang-Joon throws a question.

“Is this some sort of a ghost company made for someone to avoid taxes or something?”

“Nope.”

“Why is it then we have only you and me?”

“Oh, manger Song, in charge of the finances, is on holidays right now. He will be back in couple of days.”

“Finances?”

“Yep. He wanted to travel down to his hometown. Apparently he hasn’t been back there for too long.”

“So we only have three? Including me, who joined this company yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“With no hunters under contract?”

“Yes, you could say that.”

To her innocent yet oblivious answers, Kang-Joon loses his words.

“Well, this is a management firm, right?”

“See what’s written there?”

In the office, there indeed is a signboard with ‘Hero Management Inc.’ written on it. Of course, the same name is written on the main entrance of the office. Considering the location of this building, since it is near Gangnam station, the rent must be not too easy as well. However, there seems to be absolutely no possibility of this company making any sort of meaningful profits. Which surely makes Kang-Joons concerns very reasonable.

The CEO, Miss Seol, puts a little smile on her face as she comes to realise what Kang-Joon is actually concerned about.

“Don’t worry. You will get paid on time.”

“...You must really have a lot of money, huh?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I don’t.”

After that, Kang-Joon comes to understand everything better. The CEO of Hero Management Inc, Young Seol, although her business capability is still something to be questioned, does really have fair bit of money in her pocket. That would only be the understandable explanation for renting an office in one of the most populated areas in Seoul yet casually living an idle life, with all this delivered food.

Kang-Joon didn’t throw himself into the management industry to be idle. He considers this job as an opportunity to understand the industry better and establishing the fundamental building blocks so that he can be the owner of a giant firm and a major influence to the industry. Kang-Joon has been through a number of different management firms, but has never seen a company like this. Even the smallest companies would at least have one team of hunters under contract.

“Why were you even recruiting managers then?”

“Well, so I can manage the hunters?”

Kang-Joon holds himself back from saying ‘What good would managers be without any hunters’. No matter how hard he tries to understand this situation, the CEO of the company plainly seems insane to him.

“It’s not that we really never had anyone. We used to have quite a few...”

“So what happened to...”

“They all quit.”

Kang-Joon nods as he understands how desperate the boss must be, recalling how hard she was trying to recruit him as a hunter when he walked into the office for the interview.

“Well, that’s it. A shore ‘withered’ phase...I suppose.”

That means this company was never really a total failure. Regardless of the industry, it is hard for small business to survive for a long time and it is perfectly normal for the managers and hunters to leave a small management firm once they consider themselves experienced enough. The boss does not really feel the need to talk in detail about how big of a company Hero Management Inc. used to be. Also, she does not really see the point of mentioning the shrinking of a company that used to occupy two entire floors in the building down to one small office unit.

On top of that, it is not really a happy memory for the boss to recall either. Nevertheless, Miss Seol is far from being authoritative and respectful to every employee.

Although now, there are only two.

“By the way, manager that used to be a hunter, I’ve never even seen or heard of anyone like that. Wouldn’t those giant management firms be really keen to take you then?”

Kang-Joon never really completed any legitimate education. After all, it is not so often you see people with final records of their education being withdrawn from middle school. It is not too surprising for Kang-Joon as he had been part of the hunting business since he was fifteen. However, to the people in the management industry, number of education certificates does not really hold significance over exceptional experience in the industry. Hence, Kang-Joon’s background being a hunter makes him that much more of a desirable candidate.

Picking up a chopstick full of noddles with dumplings in his mouth, Kang-Joon answers.

“I was in Raeshen and AlphaSword for a bit.”

“Hmm? They are two of the three biggest firms.”

Raeshen Agency, AlphaSword and Cloud are said to be the biggest management firms in Korea. Indeed, there is a vast number of

managers and accordingly hunter teams under contract. It only makes sense for Miss Seol to see Kang-Joon as some sort of a weirdo as he apparently decided to quit those stable jobs from the big firms and now is a part of this extremely small firm.

“I didn’t really quit. I got fired in less than a month.”

“Huh? Why?”

In fact, Kang-Joon was intentionally looking for a small company. He has just been a little surprised at how small this company really is. To his confession, Miss Seol looks starts staring at Kang-Joon with eyes full of curiosity, as if they are saying ‘Why? Why?Why?’

“I was employed as a manager, but they kept wanting me to go on a hunt.”

“Ohh...”

It sure was easy for him to get a job, but as he started, the big firms started exploiting his backgrounds, forcing him to go into the dungeons with the hunting teams.

Every time Kang-Joon attempted to fight back claiming he no longer wanted to be a hunter, his seniors insulted and threatened him, saying he will lose his job with that attitude, maybe he was lying about his hunter background or plainly just calling him idiot.

“So I did go on a few hunts, but there was no share for me.”

“What? Really?”

“Yep. They said I wasn’t entitled since I was already getting the salary from the firm.”

“That is ridiculous...”

It is easy to say ‘go on a few hunts because of the pressure from above’, but hunting fundamentally is something life-threatening every time. Even gangsters would not do such an inhumane thing after putting someone else’s life on the line by their own selfish

wills.

That has been the problem for Kang-Joon. It was impossible for him to get a job at all if he did not reveal his hunter background, but once he did, he could get a job however was forced to go on the hunt himself or at least support the hunt on site instead.

Although Kang-Joon considers himself to be patient, doing the people up there favours seemed to only stack his anger and resentment rather than the knowledge about the industry. So he manned up, and quit. Of course, he walked out by himself once, but got fired for all the rest.

Like so, Kang-Joon found himself a small company and made sure to add in a condition in his contract such that the company will not require or expect him to directly go on a hunt. However, to the last moment of contract, Miss Seol seemed a little regretful.

“Damn, I really should have contracted you as a hunter. Then I could have been a manger for you.”

“You? A manager?”

“We are out of hands. I got to do what I got to do.”

Though Miss Seol may seem feckless and lazy, she is not a person who does not have any willpower. Kang-Joon has been sensitive to people’s instantaneous emotions appearing on their faces and hence can tell Miss Seol has some episodes which she does not want revealed.

‘She tensed up a little when I talked of AlphaSword.’ Kang-Joon thought to himself.

However, Kang-Joon decided to leave a question as question to be answered in the future. This is his first day at work and even though he may still be not used to the system of office jobs but has picked up a thing or two about the office culture of Korea.

Bureaucracy is extremely important and it is required of him to do something the people above tell him to do rather than what was

written on the job specification. Above all, Kang-Joon has learned that having good superiors are better than blindly being part of a big firm and though it may be too early to judge, Miss Seol is a good boss, regardless of her business capability.

Miss Seol keeps the conversation flowing, mentioning that the company has been running for two year and the last hunter team under contract left the firm three months ago. With no incomes for three months straight, it is almost a miracle that the company is still alive.

Time passes without doing any real tasks and it is already close to call it a day. Kang-Joon finally spits out a question he has been holding back the whole time.

“By the way boss, are you a Mutant by any chance?”

“Wow, how rude of you to say that to a woman.”

“Sorry, did I make a mistake?”

“Why don’t you go grab a stranger and ask them if they are a Mutant? That will make them feel good about themselves, right?”

“Sorry but you certainly look too young compared to your age so I’ve been really curious whether you have received any sort of Mutant treatments.”

It surely could be quiet offensive and rude to Miss Seol. However, she just lets out a short sigh as she realises it’s meant to be a compliment.

“You’ve surely been outside of this country for too long. Calling someone a Mutant is no better than swearing at them...”

The Mutants, being a sub category of hunters, is the general name for those who have acquired special powers through a number of experiments on their body. Frequently the experiments are done to growing children and as a result of extreme genetic modification and cell reformation, their bodies tend to stop aging once they reach a certain age.

However, it is extremely stressful to the body, which results in some unlucky Mutants turning into monsters or driving them to death occasionally.

Since they are the most odd and unapproachable type of hunters, it is common for them to be looked down upon. Regardless, Kang-Joon's question was no more than an expression of his curiosity because of Miss Seol's unbelievable baby face.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know it was a rude thing to say."

"No, no, no, it's fine. It's probably not even that offensive among the hunters."

In fact, though the Mutant may be looked down upon by the public, it is the pure Hunters who are discriminated in the real hunting industry.

The day at the office goes by like so and Kang-Joon heads home walking. He does own a vehicle, but it would even be more complicated to use it in the middle of Seoul where traffic jam is daily routine.

'Should I keep the job?' He thought to himself.

Kang-Joon has been through different management firms and has realised that those people he met along the way are not necessarily evil. It's just that they are so used to the command/discipline system that Kang-Joon, who was trying to go against the orders, was the odd one out.

However, after seeing himself constantly failing to fit into the system, he has realised maybe the problem does not lie only on the others.

Looking for the 'right job', he has spent a year and a half. Kang-Joon is a type of person who hates wasting his time yet that year and a half worth of time flew by without any profits. Kang-Joon was a hunter with 10 years of experience with pocket full of money, which makes him not too concerned about the salary to come in.

Regardless of their true intentions or hidden mottos, people who treat others with respect at least know how to behave as human beings. That's what Kang-Joon thinks about people. To his surprise, there is a lot of people who he cannot even consider as half decent human beings.

To be able to learn more about the industry, he needs to be running around as a manager. However, there is no hunter under contract for their firm. No hunter simply means no work for Kang-Joon. He walked into the company to learn something, but there is nothing for him to learn. This is a very big issue for him. Thinking more deeply about his job, Kang-Joon steps down to Gangnam subway station.

Since Kang-Joon lives in Sinrim, it is not too difficult for him to travel to work as the 2nd subway line directly connects the two locations with no transfer. Only problem for him would be the ridiculous number of people on the subway. Going through the sea of people, Kang-Joon walks down the stairs to access the platform. As he falls deeper into his thoughts, he is oblivious about what is happening around him and does not find it weird that no one is around him now.

All of a sudden, soldiers block his way forward then he snaps back into reality.

“Sir, you have to stop here.”

“Excuse me?”

“The area is closed for now.”

Soldiers are blocking off the area with barricades with little space left as an entrance. A guy in uniform walks up and talks to the public with a polite tone.

“A D-Class core wave has been detected in this area therefore the area is being blocked for now. Please wait for the situation to be resolved shortly. You may wait outside the platform on the ground

level.”

On one side of the barricades, there stands a group of people who are protected separately as they could not escape to the ground above due to the blocking and quarantining of the area. However none of them seems to fear what is about to happen. In fact, they surprisingly look interested. Even the soldiers are not looking too tensed up.

Monsters summoned from D-Class core should be taken care of with normal weapons quiet easily.

Chapter 4 - Magical Girl Of Seoul Subway

Line 2 (2)

“Mr, Soldier, are there any hunters coming in anytime soon?”

“Man, I’ve seen these Awake using flames last time on Bongcheon, I wish there would be people like that this time.”

“We have been notified that the designated hunter team from Raeshen is on the way right now. There are expected to get here before the situation actually begins.”

Even soldiers in this situations are no more than spectators. Kang-Joon is finding this rather funny. Normal monsters can be taken down quite easily with human weapons. They have already become a part of daily life for the humans and humans do not fear them anymore. Back in the days, people were busy creating an absolute chaos whenever those monsters appeared but now the appearing of dungeons and monsters have become almost like an entertainment for a lot of people.

Hunters, in fact, like to work in an environment with a lot of spectators. Once their recorded activity gets spread and more people in the industry come to realise their capacity, other managements become keen to recruit them. Popularity is number one priority for the hunters these days as that can bring the biggest name value for the hunter and the management both.

For a real example, one of the biggest management firms, Cloud, has decided to take a leap of faith by recruiting the most famous hunter at time, Yu-na with a ridiculous amount of money. They made a massive promotion campaign using the name value of Yu-na and it resulted in a lot of other hunters joining the firm influenced by Yu-na’s decision.

Just as the celebrities are always longing for popularity, there is a few interesting trends in the hunting management industry these

days. Just like the transfer market of sports stars, around the period when the famous hunters' contracts all finish, there is always a war among the management firms to recruit them.

Ironically, popularity and name value of the hunters have been carrying more weight over their actual hunting capability. Just as how some people prefer actors with charming appearances over actors with exceptional acting skills, management firms have been showing about the same attitudes to the hunters.

Anyhow, the barricades are located widely around the core generating location.

'Core' is a general name for the phenomenon where an unstable nucleus appears in the air which leads to monsters flooding out of it. Depending on the size and colour of the core, the types of monsters that appear out of it would vary.

Normal firearms are not authorised for usage unless the situation is considered to be extremely dangerous as inconsiderate use of them could end up with unnecessary injuries and casualties and could also damage the buildings and infrastructures. After all the hunting process has been capitalised and less life threatening than before, the trend has been to take care of them with as little damage as possible. The typical procedures involve soldiers stunning the monsters with mid-sized Taser Guns and hunters terminating the monsters once they arrive to the location.

Still, the general public is always advised to get very far from the core itself and the attempts to trespass over the barricade into the core zone is never allowed by the soldiers, no matter how light the situation is considered. All the crowd can do is to get far away from the barricade and spectate the termination process.

The person who seemingly looks like the person in charge carries a Captain mark.

"How long until the activation of the core?"

“Approximately 10, Sir.”

“Alright, make sure you do a proper safety check on your Tasers.”

Soldiers, not intimidated by the situation at all, roughly start to do a check on their Tasers, never stopping their chatter. Looking at the core at a distance, Kang-Joon is impressed by the security system established in Korea. He has been around here and there experiencing all sorts of unexpected phenomenon and always finding a quick way to handle them. As Gangnam is one of the most populated places in Seoul, the designated hunter team is managed by the Raeshen agency. Shortly, the hunter team arrives at the location.

“Hunter team, in position.”

“Thank you for coming.”

The hunter team is of three people, two with Armour Coats and one with an Aether device in their ear.

“Thank you so much always for your service, gentlemen.”

A Male Knight who looks like the leader of the team bows his head towards the soldiers, showing his gratitude, and the commander replies with a salute. Still, there is no tension, fear or sense of crisis among any of them about the situation.

“How long till the activation?”

“Seven minutes left.”

Since the appearing of the monsters, the attitudes towards the soldiers have indeed become a lot better. Quite literally, they fight on daily basis to protect the lives of countless number of innocent citizens and are respected highly for their services. The hunter team on the spot must be a C-Class team for the current D-Class situation. The members are two Knights and one Awake.

The tree approach the core as Kang-Joon looks into the core zone

briefly.

“Hmm...”

Then, he recognises something odd.

“Excuse me Sir.”

“Yes, how can I help you?”

“Could I please look into that Core?”

The soldier frowns.

“It is restricted for civilian to access the operation area.”

Strictly speaking, if the soldiers were to do everything exactly by the policies, they hold the right to tell the crowd standing around the operation zone to leave the spot right away.

“That Core though, is certainly weird.”

“What is so weird about it?”

“The surroundings of that Core, you see it’s agitating and choppy?”

Normally, the Cores take the form of perfect spheres. The surface of the sphere agitating and waving is certainly something different. It is a rare case and some people, even if they consider themselves experts for these kind of situations, might not be aware of what it actually means. However, having been through countless number of situations like this, Kang-Joon well knows what this odd looking sphere means. Looking at the oblivious commander, Kang-Joon speaks.

“That one right there, that’s a Trap Core.”

“Trap...Core?”

“That is no D-Rank Core, That’s actually B-Rank.”

It is a type of core emitting a wave two ranks lower than its original rank on purpose as a trap. A Core which has been emitting a D-Rank wave suddenly flooding B-Rank monsters would

obviously drive people into panic mode. The current situation with C-Rank hunter team in position therefore is rather dangerous. After Kang-Joon's explanation, the commander frowns.

"I've never even heard of such a thing"

"Of course, Trap Cores normally appear in South East Asia."

"I don't know what kind of person you are, but you are not to interfere with the operation."

"I'm sorry that I have to do this but otherwise all those people will die for sure. You have to authorise heavy weapons right now and call the emergency team."

Kang-Joon says, pointing at the hunter team as they approach the Core. Such a core with waving surfaces is a Trap Core for sure and it rarely appears within Korea. Compared to how dangerous this situation could be, Kang-Joon's attitude is too dry and calm. So, the commander decides to consider Kang-Joon opinion as some sort of gibberish from an insane person.

Kang-Joon lets out a sigh. Then, he pulls out his ID, putting it right in front of the commander to see clearly.

"B-Class hunter identification here."

"Hunter...? Why are you even..."

"Get these civilians to evacuate. Right now."

As the commander is just about to ask Kang-Joon why he has been standing behind the barricade the whole time, he snaps back. The hunter team on location right now is that of C-Class but the hunter standing before him is B-Class. Kang-Joon pulls out a silver metal rod from his thigh, which he always carries for emergency. Though it may look like a random rod, it is not too difficult for anyone to realise it in fact is a long blade styled Aether sword.

"Come on, listen to me. You want to kill all these people?"

From B-Rank situations, usage of heavy firearms is necessary.

Tasers will only stop the monsters movement for a split second. However, damages done to the surroundings will be a responsibility solely for the commander.

Kang-Joon walks into the operation zone. The crowd that was standing around him looks at him odd as they see who they thought was a spectator like them walking into the Core zone murmuring something.

‘Trap core... in the middle of Seoul...’

Even though the monsters are not too much of a threat these days, hunters are dying around the world and damages are done to the innocent civilians. Appearing of the monsters becoming a part of human daily life does not mean that they are no longer a threat at all.

It is just that people have learned to find death by monsters as some sort of accidents or disasters. As Kang-Joon approaches the hunter team, the seeming leader of the team alertly speaks, noticing the Aether sword in Kang-Joon’s hand.

“This is a designated area of Raeshen agency.”

“Oh, well, I am from Hero Management Inc and I am here as...”

Finding what he is about to say ridiculous himself, Kang Joon puts on a small smile and speaks.

“a manager.”

Though he may have no hunters for him to actually manage, he still is a manager no matter what. It is not a lie, but everyone seems to find it rather suspicious.

Just as they are about to tell him there is nothing for a manager to find here, they swallow their words as Kang-Joon’s Aether sword seems to output power that would easily overtake that of their own Aether devices. Kang-Joon carries on to speak with a tense face.

“Alright, call for the emergency team right now. This is a B-Rank Core disguised as D-Rank. Just trust me on this.”

The emergency team gets sent to the locations only under extremely dangerous situations and fundamentally consist of A-Class hunters or above. However, due to their lack of experience and sense of crisis, they do not tend to believe Kang-Joon’s words. At the end, Kang-Joon lets out a sigh, deciding to interfere the designated hunter team’s battle. The leader Knight tries to tell Kang-Joon to stand back as his interference would harm the team’s cooperation but Kang-Joon only points at the Core instead.

“It’s getting activated now. We have no time to fight among ourselves. Don’t even try to terminate them, just try to hold them back and pull the defence line back a bit when necessary.”

Kang-Joon normally only carries his Aether sword and armour-field generating bracelet. They are indeed high-class equipment but Kang-Joon’s pure physical abilities are nothing to compare against even that of C-Class Knight in front of him.

As the core vibrates vigorously, soon a single monster dashes out of it. It is only then everyone realises Kang-Joon’s words are true.

“Werewolf!”

Werewolf, even among the B-Rank monsters, is one of the types at the very top. Even in the emergency, Kang-Joon shouts of condescension.

“I told you! Look at that!”

“Hu...hurry up and call the emergency team!”

The Knight only then starts to make a contact to their HQ as the Tasers fly right to the werewolf.

Chapter 5 - Magical Girl Of Seoul Subway

Line 2 (3)

Getting shot by Tasers that would instantly immobilize any D-Rank monsters, a werewolf only trembles its body for a split second.

The two Knights charge in with their Aether swords in their hands while The Awake attempts to immobilize the werewolf with telekinesis.

Not going down by the attack from the hunter team, the werewolf smacks the Knight, throwing a heavy blow to the leader Knight's head. The Knight stomps to the right trying to stand against the damage. The blow was strong enough to make cracks through the cement floor where the Knight stepped. A normal person's head would have exploded like a watermelon, but the Knight could withstand the damage with his enhanced body. There was extra defense from the Armour Coat, but all Knights just have ridiculously hard bodies.

'If I had that, I wouldn't have quit.'

As the werewolf notices the Knight still standing after the attack, it springs its body, dashing to the right. The werewolf intends to break the barricade and run over. But Kang-Joon, already having assumed what it would do, dashes to the same direction.

Kang-Joon runs into the werewolf, slashing his Aether sword horizontally. The werewolf's head comes off clean.

"!"

"Y...you!"

The hunting team stands surprised at Kang-Joon's bold, clean move. Werewolves are very agile and their responses to attacks are very fast, making them a difficult target to land a critical strike against. Despite all that, Kang-Joon, definitely not having the

physical abilities of werewolves, forecasted its moves perfectly and cut its head off right away. To have such movements with no extra energy wasted, the hunter team from Raeshen agency lost their words.

Kang-Joon has not survived as a B-Class hunter for no reason. With the lack of physical capabilities, he's had no choice but to cut down on the number of unnecessary movements and attempt to forecast the enemy's next move.

“For werewolf classes, they always dash back to avoid strikes no matter what. Then they generally dash right or left to switch the target. Pretty much no other movements than that, so if you fight them with that in mind, it's easy to handle them.”

“Ah, ye..yes!”

The hunter team snaps back, listening to Kang-Joon's orders.

“Don't try to hunt it down. Knights stand with their enhanced body and the Awake pressures the werewolves down the space around them so they won't be able to avoid those Tasers. Rather than trying to kill one of them, just cooperate with the soldiers. The whole point is to support the soldiers to land their Tasers, alright?”

“O....Ok! We got it.”

From the appearance of the first, werewolves start to flood out.

From the other side of the barricade, the soldiers are firing their Tasers non-stop and the werewolves with more than five Tasers shots fall to the ground as if they are having a seizure.

The Knights, as Kang-Joon's commands, concentrate on hardening their bodies to guard the attacks from the werewolves so they won't be able to move around too much. Making a full use of the blue barriers from their Armour Coats and their enhanced bodies, they are standing well. Over the barricades, soldiers are immobilizing the werewolves one by one with their accurately

aimed shots. Kang-Joon is busy avoiding the attacks from the werewolves while swinging his Aether sword sharply to cut through the werewolves' skin. As the Knights witness Kang-Joon's Aether sword cutting away the skin of the werewolves like it is a piece of carrot, they cannot hide their surprised faces but just stand amazed.

With their Aether sword, such power and output is impossible.

‘That equipment is at least SS-Rank or above!’

Throughout entire Korea, people with an SS-Rank Aether sword could be counted on fingers. Kang-Joon's Aether sword, in fact, a masterpiece among masterpieces, even with a name ‘Thousand Anguish’.

Though they may have been holding well, once their line starts to break, tens of men would be slaughtered right away. The situation is beyond risky. Werewolves keep flooding out of the core and there are more than thirty lying around it, immobilized.

“Heavy fire! Everyone evacuate!”

As the commander finishes the preparation for the usage of heavy fire weapons, he shouts towards them to warn the hunters. This is indeed a major decision from him. Risking the damages to the infrastructures and surroundings to use those weapons means that he will be asked for his responsibility later on from his high-ups. No matter what, he is a soldier and also an expert in hunting.

“Get out!”

Soldiers who were standing on the right side of the barricades pulled out of their position as a custom-made heavy firearm to fight the monsters, AB-34 as known as ‘Alien Breaker’ gets installed on the spot. Firing three thousand 50-caliber bullets per minute, this class of firearm turns any monster into a piece of bloody rag given they do not use armor fields. However, the use of this firearm would mean a major recovering construction on the

subway station.

As the marksman holds the trigger ready for a sweeping fire, other soldiers shower the escaping werewolves with Tasers. Every werewolf that is coming out of the core collapses down to the floor shot by a countless number of Tasers which almost turns them into a hedgehog. As the AB-34 is just about to start firing, Kang-Joon notices something popping out into the barricades from somewhere in the station.

“Hold!”

“!”

“Th...that kid!”

Clothed in flashy pink costume, a little girl intrudes into the situation all of a sudden.

“The Magical Girl of Justice, Acacia! On spot!”

Looking to be about twelve years old, a girl with pink hair proudly trespasses into the restricted zone, holding a wand in her hand. Kang-Joon, having no idea what is going on, frowns to process what is happening before his eyes. Beyond his reaction is from the soldiers.

“Oh...oh! The Magical Girl!”

“Acacia is here!”

“Mr. soldiers! I got this now!”

Even beyond that, the hunters.

“Th...thank God. Acacia’s here.”

“...Just looks like an insane girl, no matter how hard I look.”

But even more insane things start to happen from the hands of the girl. As if she is trying to cast some magic, she starts to wave her hands in the air like a conductor.

“Go! Arch Bust Flame!”

Suddenly appears cracks in the air, werewolves get cut down to pieces. Losing his words at the scene, Kang-Joon opens up his mouth wide.

“What the hell.”

Kang-Joon well knows this whole scene is ridiculously crazy. The crazy girl wearing some sort of typical Magical Girl dress controls her telekinesis in an extremely fine manner to use it like a sword to cut through dimensions. Standing right on the spot, as she slashes tens of spots in the thin air, the bodies of werewolves get cut into pieces as if they are supposed to do so.

“But why would she even name a telekinesis ability with ‘flame’?”

Listening to the names of her abilities which sound to be made up on the spot, Kang-Joon loses his word even more.

“Take this! Wand of justice!”

Having trespassed into the battlefield, the girl approaches the werewolves with teleport, exploding their heads like watermelons. Kang-Joon could tell that the wand held by the girl is not even an Aether device but a cheap plastic toy wand which can be purchased at a kids’ store.

Terminating all the werewolves in a split second, the girl continues to bash them down until the core stops to let the monsters out.

“Today’s good deed, done!”

Then she gives a bow towards the hunters and the soldiers.

“Farewell, everybody.”

“Acacia, you are the best!”

“Thank you!”

“Can you hold my hand for a second please?”

Soldiers wave their hands toward her out of joy as Acacia spins her body in the air, vanishing with scattering pink fog. The leader Knight lets out a sigh of comfort, smiling.

“We got lucky. Getting Acacia’s help...”

“Wha...what the hell was that...thing? A Returner...?”

To Kang-Joon’s knowledge, only the Returners are the ones powerful enough to do such an act. Such powers to break the borders of common knowledge are only exhibited by the people who have come back from the Other World, Ishtar. They can actually use magic which seems to have come out of games, bashing the monsters down with ‘abilities’ or ‘skills’ just like in the games.

“You don’t know Acacia?”

“Acacia?”

“The Magical Girl, she’s been famous for a while.”

The Awake, who has been supporting the battle with telekinesis, says to Kang-Joon.

“She appears out of nowhere, vanishes into nothing like that.”

“Ha...Ha... what the hell even is this...”

“She only appears when there is a Core situation but she doesn’t really care about the Core energy itself. Which is good for us.”

For seemingly oblivious Kang-Joon, The Awake tells more things about The Magical Girl, Acacia. It has been about half a year from her first appearance and she occasionally appears to a Core situation like the one just before, slaughters the monsters then vanishes in a split second. Saying that her charm is the mismatch between her real power and skill names which sound extremely dramatic, there is even a group of fans for her. The pink hair might be a too bold of choice, but there still are people who try to get close-up pictures because of her cute-looking face.

Identity not confirmed, she only calls herself The Magical Girl.

“Hoooo...well, the situation has been resolved well. Thanks everyone for their efforts.”

To the Captain's showing of appreciation, Kang-Joon gives a nod with a still oblivious face. The A-Class emergency team from Raeshen also seems to understand what happened after hearing that Acacia has been through the scene.

Kang-Joon, not really close with the media, has never heard there is such a monster who claims to be The Magical Girl in Seoul. Though he has been through a lot of uncommon phenomena around this world, things like this are not something he experiences often.

However, to some, Kang-Joon seems to be more of a monster than Acacia. A normal human with good physical abilities at best, Kang-Joon cut through B-Rank werewolves, avoiding countless attacks from them. It is only normal for people to be curious about who he really is.

“Oh, we did not have any critical damage thanks to your orders. I appreciate your help.”

“Well, yea...don't worry too much about it...”

Without Kang-Joon's orders, the werewolves would have run over the barricade, turning the scene into a massive human slaughter. Everyone at the scene knows that for sure. Following Kang-Joon's order, the Captain had led the civilians to evacuate. However, even then, there would have surely been a number of casualties among the soldiers.

Kang-Joon knew how to position and command the soldiers right and due to his clear orders, everyone could save their lives.

“So you are...?”

“I'm a manager.”

After that, Kang-Joon blankly looks at the core extraction process being done by the hunters.

“Oh, by the way,”

Kang-Joon grins at them.

“I will have to take my share.”

Since the hunting was pretty much done by Acacia, Kang-Joon is entitled to his own share. The hunters give him a nod though they do not look to be fully happy with it.

A favor is a favor, but the payment still needs to be made. Kang-Joon has solid standards about the payments. Getting his own share of the Core, Kang-Joon is still deep in his own thoughts. As he looks at a flood of people coming into the station as soon as it opens up, Kang-Joon asks the leader of the hunter party.

“Hey, you know...”

“Yea?”

“That little girl called Acacia, does she have a manager?”

“Uhm...I assume not. If she did, that management would have put out a massive promotion using her, right? But I’ve never seen such management yet...”

“Oh...right...”

Kang-Joon grins. No matter who that girl really is, Kang-Joon is only interested in one thing.

‘A hunter without an owner.’

In his mind, Kang-Joon started to build up the ‘Operation Magical Girl recruitment plan’.

Chapter 6 - Magical Girl Of Seoul Subway

Line 2 (4)

Gangnam station is full of people trying to get on the subway as it opened up and subways started to come back in. Once the situation is completely over, a person who seems to be the manager of the hunter team at the scene walks in.

Kang-Joon was part of the Raeshen agency for a while. He is familiar with some hunters and managers. Although he has never seen the hunter team who he fought with as he was there for only a short amount of time, the manager who is walking into the scene right now is someone Kang-Joon knows.

“Thanks for your effort. How’s the result?”

“40 B-Rank Cores extracted and that person over there got 10 as his share because he helped us out in the process.”

Though the area may be a designated spot for the Raeshen, it is a custom among the hunters to let others take their share if they contributed to the hunting. Hence, the hunter team from Raeshen does not seem to have any evident complaints.

Even though technically, the majority of the extracted Cores are supposed to belong to Acacia, Acacia has never seemed to be interested.

The manager, as well as taking care of the hunters, is also an overseer to ensure that the hunters do not pocket or under-claim the extracted resources from the hunt. About ten of the forty Cores being distributed to a complete stranger, the manager turns and looks at Kang-Joon.

“Uh, you...”

“Ah, long time no see.”

“Kang-Joon...”

The manager frowns. He taught Kang-Joon a few things when Kang-Joon was at Raeshen as his direct senior. However, above all that, he was the one who was busier wasting his time by making Kang-Joon do unnecessary chores and scolding him for nothing to boast his supremacy at work.

“Did you quit managing and go back to your original job or something?”

“Nope. I’m still a manager. “

“Ah, is he the one...?”

Only then the other hunters put their hands together as they remember the words about a manager with a hunter background who was at Raeshen for a short amount of time. The manager scowls at Kang-Joon with a mocking smile.

“You joined somewhere else? Where?”

“Hero Management Inc.”

As he is well aware of other firms around, he sneers at Kang-Joon.

“Oh, that collapsed management?”

“Well, it does seem to be pretty small.”

Kang-Joon does not get stirred up by the manager’s cheesy taunt.

“They don’t have any hunters under contract. Who do you actually manage then?”

“Well, I’ll have to look for them.”

Against the manager’s mocking attitude, Kang-Joon only stays completely calm. Even when Kang-Joon was at Raeshen, he used to constantly try to piss Kang-Joon off in different ways. He demanded Kang-Joon’s complete respect and kept trying to show off his supremacy by forcing Kang-Joon to do something completely unrelated to work.

Every time, Kang-Joon still did whatever the manager told him to do with an empty look on his face and that made the manager think Kang-Joon considers him easy with his hunter background. So, his demands got more and more ridiculous everyday.

For example, he once told Kang-Joon to punch a total stranger in the face and scolded him for not carrying out the senior's orders. Nevertheless, he survived in Raeshen even after Kang-Joon quit and has now become a manager in charge of a C-Class hunter team.

“It's not like there's going to be any good thing out of that half-bankrupted company. You might as well go get a part-time job at a convenience store or...”

“Hey.”

One of the A-Class emergency hunter team speaks out. A female hunter is looking at the manager with a disgusted look. Since the A-Class team is indeed a valuable asset to Raeshen, the manager gets tensed up and answers.

“Y...Yes.”

“What kind of bullshit are you talking to a person who risked his life? He saved our hunters from a trap when he had nothing to do with any of this. What are you to talk to him like that? Do you still call yourself a manager when you lack basic etiquette?”

The manager is someone in charge of C-Class hunter team, who has nothing to do with the A-Class hunters. It is obvious that they do not know each other considering the massive size of Raeshen.

“No, it's not that, I was just advising my junior manager since I haven't seen him in a long time and...”

“Advice? Looks like picking a fight to me?”

“Ah, please don't make a fuss about it. I'm alright. Thank you.”

To the A-Class Knight who tried to stand on Kang-Joon's side, he shows his appreciation. With black hair and an elegant look, the

Knight still seems to be rather charismatic from her attitude. The manager who was sneering at Kang-Joon shuts up with his face blushing of embarrassment.

“I’m sorry. I appreciate your help. You must have panicked in the emergency as well...”

If Kang-Joon did not notice the Trap Core, the C-Class hunter team would have panicked, completely oblivious about how to react in the situation. If so, the scene could have been a terrible scene of mass slaughter. Hence the hunters very well know what Kang-Joon has really done in the situation. Kang-Joon puts up a smile as the female leader of the A-Class team reaches out her hand for a handshake.

“If I heard it right, you are a B-Class hunter.”

“Well, retired now.”

“Ah, yes...”

She looks at Kang-Joon with her eyes filled with respect. Pure human hunters without any special abilities are losing their spots as the number of Knights and Mutants keep increasing. Hence, B-Class as a pure hunter has come to mean that person has done everything they could as a hunter with no ability. To what Kang-Joon has achieved without any special power, she is showing her admiration and respect.

“Ho-Yeon. I’m a Knight.”

“Yes, Kang-Joon. A manager from Hero Management Inc.”

The face of the manager who was making fun of Kang-Joon until then gets even worse as he witnesses an A-Class Knight, who is almost like a God to him, shaking hands with Kang-Joon. He comes to be reminded of the class gap between Kang-Joon and him again.

“If there is no more business, I should get going now.”

“Ah yes. Sorry for holding someone busy like you for too long. Thank you again for today.”

“Yep.”

The C-Class hunter team sends a goodbye with respect for Kang-Joon saving their lives today. Kang-Joon replies with a light bow, then speaks to the manager.

“It was good to see you again. By the way, I got something I want to know...”

“Uh, well...ask if you want...”

“What was your name again? I don’t quite seem to remember...”

As Kang-Joon asks with a grin, the manager’s pride comes breaking down. After everything that he forced Kang-Joon to go through, Kang-Joon does not even remember his name.

“Suk-Won. You forget names that easily?”

“Ah, I don’t seem to remember something unnecessary. Well, keep up the good work.”

Kang-Joon turns after tapping on Suk-Won’s shoulders a couple of times. Those taps indeed had a lot of meanings and Suk-Won comes to realize that he has been completely looked down upon.

Kang-Joon heads home with his Cross Bag(E/N: anyone who reads EER feels like this is a reference?) packed with his own share of Cores. As he walks away, one thought seems to fill up Kang-Joon’s mind.

‘That A-Class Knight... I swear I heard her name from somewhere...’

Kang-Joon comes to think that the victim of million dollar fraud, whom he heard about from Miss Seol, might be the very Knight he just met.

Already, the problems with Suk-Won has been wiped off Kang-Joon’s mind. He does not even seem to think about some things

that are not so important in his life. Of course, Suk-Won has to deal with his boiling inside as he heads back to the office, thinking about how he got completely made fun of by his former junior.

Chapter 7 - Magical Girl Of Seoul Subway

Line 2 (5)

In his apartment located in Sinrim, Kang-Joon starts thinking more about Acacia. What he has seen was a dramatically enhanced telekinesis ability. It was a power strong enough to cut through dimensions over tens of random spots simultaneously. When struck by the werewolves, Acacia did not even move one bit. With no apparent Aether device equipped, that could only be explained if she has an enhanced body like the Knights.

Supernatural powers like the Awakes; enhanced body like the Knights. On top of that, teleportation which only the Awakes with space-related abilities can handle. All this does not make sense for Kang-Joon.

Taking them apart one by one, there can surely exist someone with such power. Masters in telekinesis should indeed be able to do what Acacia has done. Knights can surely have a body strong enough to stand the strikes from werewolves. The Awakes with dimension-related abilities can definitely disappear into the thin air and teleport here and there.

But, it does not make sense at all for one person to have it all. It is physically impossible for a single hunter to have an enhanced body of the Knights and supernatural powers of the Awakes at the same time. Becoming a Knight, Strictly speaking, is a branch of turning into a Mutant and Mutants cannot ever awaken their supernatural powers inside them. Vice versa, if any Awakes become a Knight through a mutating process, they end up losing their powers.

Hence, the power possessed by Acacia is beyond one's understanding. It has not been too long since the first appearance of Acacia, so there has been a big discussion about whether or not her power is real.

However, Kang-Joon has been pretty much everything one can

imagine as a hunter, and therefore could exactly tell what Acacia's true power really is. He could come to the conclusion after searching through a number of videos online.

‘She's only using telekinesis.’

Acacia actually does not have an enhanced body and only uses telekinesis instead. Kang-Joon watched a video footage of her fighting a giant bear which was almost seven meters tall.

The bear's front paw comes down upon Acacia and there is a massive sound of the collision. Yet, Acacia stands like nothing ever happened. However, Kang-Joon pays more attention to the ground. If Acacia really just used an enhanced body in the video, her feet should have gone through the surface deeper into the ground or caused the asphalt on the ground to crack. But, in the video, there seem to be minor cracks from the combat in general yet no cracks or major damage from the attack just then.

Which then means, Acacia's defense mechanism is something different to an enhanced body. In fact, it is simply generating a resisting force field around herself to block the attacks.

There has been a group of people who shared the same thought as Kang-Joon. However, to be able to explain that, there needs to be a convincing reason as to why Acacia can use more than two of different types of supernatural powers. Telekinesis and teleportation are completely different types. It is a common understanding among people that one can only own one specific type of power. Of course, Kang-Joon has seen special cases of people owning two or more powers, but what he is witnessing is something completely different.

‘This is Avatar.’

He pays more attention to not just her teleportation and telekinesis, but the pink mist she sprays whenever she moves around. It is possible for some special ones to have two or more powers, but to think so, Acacia's powers are way beyond measure.

To Kang-Joon's understanding, the girl is showing powers that are almost on an extreme expert level and it sure is impossible for such a little girl to be so, considering her age and the time of her debut, regardless of her talent.

However, it would make sense for Acacia to show such high levels of power if she, as Kang-Joon thinks, really has been using Avatar. Avatar is an extremely rare ability and there are no more than five around the whole world who possess that. Hence, only a few people are aware of its existence.

Some Awakes can intentionally fall into an out-of-body state, allowing them to give somewhat of a physical form to their wills. In such spirit forms, the Awakes can make dramatically better use of their powers and use them in a way more exaggerated manners since they are no longer bound by their physical bodies. There is no better state to make use of flames, thunderbolts, and telekinesis.

But, the critical downside is that continuous use of such spirit forms holds the risk of literally burning their brains. Using two or more powers can actually even speed up this process.

Exactly why, Acacia, in fact, has been concentrating only on a dramatic use of telekinesis. Her teleportation actually is just moving her spirit-form in an extreme speed which human eyes cannot follow. Though such movements on a real, physical body will break the body apart due to inertia, Acacia can pull it off using her spirit-form.

‘An avatar user...’

Kang-Joon comes to wonder in what kind of hidden place Acacia has been controlling her Avatar. Her overpowered ability actually is balanced out as it comes to risk her life the more she uses it. Avatar users always have a dagger to their own back by making use of their powers.

If the usage of Avatar is too frequent or the user tries to draw out

too much power, there is a risk of their very own spirit being detached from their body hence end up becoming a ghost or die from sudden heart attack. Once their body dies, the spirit, with nowhere to go back to, goes on a rampage and becomes uncontrollable. Kang-Joon has fought against such spirit before. The penalty for the Avatar users is bigger than any other Awakes as a payback for their extreme powers.

Nevertheless, Kang-Joon decides to worry about all that once he recruits her successfully.

Acacia right now is almost like a walking time bomb and, to Kang-Joon's eyes, she does not seem to realize that herself.

"Boss, can I go on a little business trip for a while?"

"Huh? Trip?"

Miss Seol looks at Kang-Joon suspiciously, as if she is asking 'What trip when the company has no business to do'.

"You trying to go to an internet café or something, aren't you?"

"What, you think I'm some sort of an asshole?"

"How can I trust any words from you when you got yourself into this company with bullshit?"

"...Well, that's true."

"What are you trying to do?"

"Going to do a bit of headhunting."

"Headhunting?"

"Got to go look for them rather than sitting here waiting."

"It's not even the end of the contract period."

All the contracts over the hunters in Korea come to an end in October. Around then, there is an active switching of management firms among the hunters. Almost like a transfer market for sports players, different managements always get their contracts to finish

in October whether it is three years or five years long to be able to concentrate on recruiting only during a specific period. It is a tacit agreement in the industry. Yet, it is only May now.

“I’m going to try getting the Magical Girl.”

“Magical Girl? You talking about Acacia?”

“Yep.”

“Apparently she seems to be better off herself rather than listening to others. There has been a number of managements that tried to contact her but they don’t really seem to have received anything from her...”

Acacia only appears out of nowhere and disappears once the situation is resolved. A countless number of managers tried getting to her but no one got anything back.

“Doesn’t hurt to try, right?”

“Oh, well... I guess...”

Whether Kang-Joon sits at the office or an internet café, there is no different in that the company still has no business to do anyway. Miss Seol seems to consider Kang-Joon’s proposal for a second then give him a nod.

“Ok. Go on. How are you planning to find her?”

“Well, I got my ways.”

Kang-Joon says, grinning. Miss Seol still has no idea what is going on in Kang-Joon’s head.

Kang-Joon’s ‘trip’ was rather long. After Kang-Joon did not show up at the office for a week, Miss Seol even came to worry that Kang-Joon may have just quit his job. By calling him, she always got the same answer, ‘busy on his trip’. From the sounds of bustling crowds instead of any sort of game sounds, she only could vaguely think that Kang-Joon was not fooling around, hopefully.

On the day Kang-Joon’s trip gets to the 10th day, Kang-Joon

slams open the door, coming back into the office. The finance manager has been back to his spot from the holidays and now is falling asleep in his chair. Miss Seol, who has been scrolling through her social network, stands up from her spot.

“Boss, I’m back.”

“Be honest with me, Kang-Joon. You just have been going to Internet ca...huh?”

Kang-Joon certainly has come back from his trip and to his right is a girl who looks to be a university student in her early twenties, blushing with her head down.

“Who is this lady?”

“Who do you think?”

Kang-Joon smiles confidently.

“The Magical Girl.”

The girl lifts her head up slowly, still scared. Then, she gives Miss Seol a bow once they make an eye contact.

“He....Hello... I’m Gi-na.”

“Wh...What are you talking about? Acacia is a little girl...”

Acacia only looks to be about eleven or twelve, although the girl who Kang-Joon brought with him certainly looks to be rather young, it is obvious that she is an adult woman. But, looking at her face slowly, there seem to be a subtle traces of Acacia.

“An avatar generally takes a different form than the physical owner.”

As Kang-Joon starts using a random jargon, Miss Seol does not seem to quite understand. The girl blushes even more with her face turning almost pure red like she is going through the most embarrassing moment of her life.

The Magical Girl Acacia is, in fact, a full-grown woman, not a kid.

“How...How did you find her?”

“That’s a long story. Let’s write the contract first.”

The Magical Girl Acacia (24) sits down at a table.

Miss Seol still is curious about how in the world Kang-Joon succeeded to pull Acacia and bring her to this very spot right now. In fact, she is not even quite sure if this girl before her eyes is really Acacia. Nevertheless, as there is a willing customer, Miss Seol pulls out a hunter contract which she has not made any use of for quite a while.

Chapter 8 - Avatar (1)

To start with, Kang-Joon looked more into the locations where Acacia appeared. In the last six months, Acacia has shown herself only in Seoul.

During that time, Acacia was captured in seven video footages and, according to news articles, has showed up to sixteen different situations. Specifically, she only made an appearance in Core situations.

There has been no article about her resolving a Pocket Dimension or Dungeon situations. There have been five Pocket Dimension situations in the last six months yet Acacia has not been to any of them.

Avatars can enter both the Dungeon and Pocket Dimension.

Although monster breakout is rather common and frequent in Seoul, thanks to the high use of Wide-Range Wave Sensors, recognizing and reacting to those situations as quick as possible has no longer been a problem.

Submerged too deep in his own thoughts, Kang-Joon went past the station he was supposed to get off by far. Since he was supposedly on a 'business trip', there really was no need for him to get off at Gangnam station.

Thus he decided to stay on the subway for a while and go around the loop so he could have some time to peacefully think more.

The Magical Girl, although not all, has intervened in quite a few of monster breakouts in Seoul. There is a large number of hunters. So even in the rural areas, the designated hunters are always there to react to different situations.

There has been a confirmed theory about the proportional relationship between population and abnormal phenomenon.

Since there is a large population in Seoul, the frequency of

abnormal phenomenon is also proportionally high. Hence, there are more hunters in Seoul compared to another city, making it not too hard for the situation to be resolved as soon as possible.

While on the Seoul city loop train, Kang-Joon quietly looked outside the window.

He needed to find her, yet there were no evident traces.

[Dear passengers, Core energy has been detected around the City Hall Station. Hence, an army unit is on the way to resolve the situation. If the situation is not resolved by the time this subway gets to the station, we will bypass the station without stopping. Thank you for understanding. Dear passengers, Core energy has been...]

To the announcement, a few of the passengers let out a sigh, while the others remained unstirred. Those who wanted to get to the City Hall Station had no choice but to get off at the next station and walk all the way.

In the midst of that, Kang-Joon came to realize something completely different yet useful for him.

Then, he scanned through the information he saved on his phone. There was a list of locations where Acacia was spotted. Kang-Joon started looking for the nearest stations around those locations.

Gangnam, Daerim, Gangbyeon, Jamsil, Euljiro 3-ga, Hapjeong...

On the news articles, the locations were specified with its suburban address so Kang-Joon had no idea. However, looking at those stations, Kang-Joon came to realize a totally different point.

Suddenly, Kang-Joon felt his head clearing up. Every location where The Magical Girl has shown herself up was...

around the 2nd subway line stations.(E/N: Someone play the detective Conan theme song)

Information about monster breakout is not necessarily broadcasted quickly to the unrelated areas. Such spreading of information can result in unnecessary panic. Hence, it has been set as a policy to inform only those in the nearby area.

However, since the subways go around the whole Seoul city and are supposed to stop at every station, every monster breakout in the city has been notified to the passengers as an announcement.

Which means, if a normal civilian or freelance hunter is to get any information, the subway is the easiest way to do so. It may be not quite efficient in different ways, but Kang-Joon thought it was clever and somewhat of a cute idea.

After that, it was a race against time.

Since then, Kang-Joon was looking for kids who looked to be about eleven or twelve on the second subway line by going through different carriages.

Acacia did not make an appearance to the Core at the City Hall station. Swapping and going back and forth and the 2nd subway line, Kang-Joon kept looking for a little girl who could possibly be Acacia only to reach nobody.

After two days of searching, Kang-Joon had come up with a different plan. A little girl who was on a subway by herself was indeed easy to be recognized. Although Kang-Joon spotted a few children like that, none of them stayed on the subway but got off at some point, heading somewhere else.

Once, Kang-Joon came to find a girl who he thought was very likely to be Acacia herself. Hence, he was keeping his eye on her.

“Hey.”

“Ah, yes?”

“Why do you keep looking at that little girl?”

A woman in her thirties said, scowling at him.

Only then, Kang-Joon came to realize what he was doing might cause a very big misunderstanding. Once wrongly accused, he could be dragged to a police station right away.

However, Kang-Joon was quick with his response. Pulling out his hunter ID from his wallet, Kang-Joon whispered into the woman's ear.

"I have been working on this important case for a while. So it would be appreciated if you could just cooperate for now. Shhh, please don't do anything that would draw attention. If you keep looking around and act suspicious, you will ruin my case."

"Oh, yes, yes..."

"Please get off at the next stop. Then you wouldn't have to deal with anything annoying. Just look at your phone and act distracted."

The woman could not see any logical reason as to why a hunter was going after a little girl, the world of hunters was something beyond her understanding.

She seemed overwhelmed by Kang-Joon's mentioning of his 'case', nodding to Kang-Joon's words with a tense face. There was a bit of attention drawn towards Kang-Joon and the woman, but they got back to their own business once they overheard Kang-Joon mentioning hunter and somewhat.

As Kang-Joon kept talking as if he was some sort of an expert, the woman really froze up and fixed her eyes only on her phone with cold sweat running down her face.

As Kang-Joon said, the woman in her thirties got off at the next station. He got out of all the annoying troubles.

Although, there was not really any annoying troubles for the woman but Kang-Joon once he was accused of something very wrong.

Kang-Joon got out of the situation with his exceptional bullshit

skill. Then he realized he might have been too obvious in keeping his eye on his potential target, causing him to be more subtle since then.

The girl who Kang-Joon thought was a possibility soon got off the subway. To say she was Acacia, she got off way too soon.

As Kang-Joon failed day by day, he started thinking maybe there was a fundamental mistake in his approach.

If Acacia really was a kid, she's supposed to attend to her school yet The Magical Girl appeared only around the subway stations. Then, what about her parents? Is she an orphan? How does she make a living then?

Trying to answer such questions, Kang-Joon started from a clean slate. This time, as well as the locations of appearance, he also looked into the time frame.

From there, Kang-Joon came to one more useful information.

The time around which Acacia appeared was concentrated between 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Also, during the weekend, she appeared randomly, regardless of time. That could only mean one thing.

Acacia could only work as the Magical Girl from 6 p.m. during weekdays and there was no restriction on the weekend. Which meant there was some sort of a barrier for her during the weekdays.

Possibly school, or full-time job. If she really was a kid, it still did not quite explain how she could be on the scene from 6 p.m. freely.

Kang-Joon knew that the appearance of Avatar was not restricted to the appearance of the owner.

Hence, he flipped his thoughts and came to the conclusion that the person behind Acacia might actually not be a child. Then, it would explain why other managers could not quite get to her.

Since then, Kang-Joon changed his targets. He no longer paid

attention only to the children with the traces of Acacia but anyone that he thought looked like her.

During this process, Kang-Joon had to spend a lot of time. He was afraid he might never be able to get to her if he only searched for her during her time of appearance so he almost lived on the subway.

From early morning, he swapped around the 2nd subway line, looking at people's faces. Going back and forth and staying on the subway for almost the whole day certainly required quite a bit of stamina, but it was not too difficult for Kang-Joon.

‘Better than hiking those mountains.’

Kang-Joon has been around the most extreme terrains in the world, searching for monsters that went hidden and wild into nature. For him, searching through carriages of the subway was a piece of cake.

As he was getting bored with his search, he came to spot a few possibilities only to later see that they were not the person he was looking for.

4 p.m. on the weekend, Kang-Joon was going past Hapjeong to spot a woman looking into her phone quietly on her seat, on the fifth carriage of the subway.

She looked rather attractive, dressed in a comfortable sweatsuit with her hair tied back clean. It was fair to say she somewhat looked like Acacia.

Only looking into her phone, she did not even look around or tried to see where the subway was going. They went past three stations like that and as Kang-Joon stared at her still looking at her phone, he started to become certain about his feeling.

Casually, Kang-Joon came to stand in front of her, overlooking what she was doing.

She was searching.

[Abnormal phenomenon in Seoul, current status]

Though it may not be the fastest, internet news was never too slow to notify the situation to the public. Staying on the 2nd subway line, the woman would jump right into the location once she spotted a situation. Standing in front of her, Kang-Joon hesitated for a second. There was no certain clue that this woman was the Magical Girl.

However, it did not hold him back completely.

“Found you. Magical Girl.”

“Oh, Oh my God!”

She panicked and recoiled, dropping her phone.

“W...Wh....Wh.....Who are you?”

“Uh huh, looks like I really did find you.”

He taunted her out of uncertainty. Yet, his assumption was entirely correct. Grinning, Kang-Joon looked at the full grown ‘Magical Girl’. The woman looked back at Kang-Joon but immediately kept her head down, murmuring.

“You...you found a wrong person. Wh...Wh...What Magical Girl are you talking about? Acacia is a little girl and I’m a grown adult...”

“Never said, Acacia. I only said ‘Magical Girl’, right?”

“I...I mean!”(E/N: She’s a kuudere lol)

She looked like a type of person to stuff up her words when embarrassed. She was almost digging her own grave and lying into it.

“Well, that’s that. There’s a lot of eyes here. Can we talk quietly for a bit?”

“.....”

With eyes full of wariness, she looked back at Kang-Joon. There

was already a few people looking at them because of their weird conversation. Blushing, she decided to deny no matter what.

“Nope. I’m not the person you are looking for. Who are you anyway? I’m going to call the police if you don’t get away.”

If things got messy, it would be Kang-Joon who would look like a weirdo. Using the crowd as her tools, it was obvious that Kang-Joon would be kicked out of the train and miss her forever.

That would mean that all his effort up until then would turn into a handful of ash. Kang-Joon’s face tensed up and the woman, still panicking inside, pretended to be calm and stared at Kang-Joon fiercely.

Right at that moment, an announcement started coming out in the subway.

[Dear passengers, D-Rank Core situation has been detected around the Daerim Station. If the situation is not resolved by the time this subway gets to the station, we will bypass the station without stopping. Thank you for understanding. Dear passengers, D-Rank Core situation has been...]

Including the woman, every passenger on the carriage started to tense up. There was a few civilian who was letting out a sigh or tilting their heads a little bit as if they were finding the announcement odd. The woman scowled at Kang-Joon with a stern look.

“Oh, what a bad coincidence...it had to be right at this moment...”

“Ah, no way...”

Agonizing for a second, she clenched her teeth. They were at Hapjeong and there still was a few stations to go through until Daerim.

However, for the Magical Girl to be able to get to the spot before the breakout, she had to fall into the out-of-body state as soon as

possible.

She was a woman with strong sense of justice and since she started acting as the Magical Girl, she had decided to run into any situation if she was aware of it.

“You...You... I don’t know what kind of person you are, but let’s talk later. Just, just a while. Just wait for twenty minutes.”

She came to admit and told Kang-Joon to wait. Kang-Joon put on a weird smile and tapped her on her shoulders when she was just about to close her eyes.

“There’s no need to pull out the Avatar.”

Kang-Joon said, pulling out his phone with the voice recording app running on the screen. As he pressed the play button, a voice recording started to come out.

[Dear passengers, D-Rank Core situation has been detected around the Daerim Station. If the situation is not resolved by the time this subway gets to the station, we will bypass the station without stopping. Thank you for understanding. Dear passengers, D-Rank Core situation has been...]

It was a recorded file of the announcement on the 2nd subway line which Kang-Joon prepared before.

As the sound source of the announcement was above her head because she was sitting down with Kang-Joon standing in front of her, she did not quite think deeply about volume or the sound quality of the announcement.

Chapter 9 - Avatar (2)

She was shocked, shocked enough to make her brain go completely blank. Then, she realized why some passengers were tilting their heads as if there was something wrong with the announcement.

The announcement, in fact, was not coming from the speakers on the subway, but from Kang-Joon's phone.

It was a trick exploiting the fact that she would only listen closely to the content of the announcement rather than trying to find where the sound source was and the 2nd subway line is always packed with people. Kang-Joon was not quite sure whether she would buy it or not...

yet she completely got fooled.

“As...As if...”

“Should we talk for a minute now?”

Kang-Joon then followed by a somewhat frightening statement.

“It's related to your life as well.”

The full-grown Magical Girl, Acacia, opened up her eyes wide in shock.

They got off at the next station and went into the café nearby. They exchanged names and Kang-Joon got to know her name is Gi-Na.

She was always worried about the responsibility which she might have to face for the hunting activities and the damages she had done to the surroundings and infrastructure with no hunter ID whatsoever. Kang-Joon smiled at her, bringing two drinks from the counter.

“Mocha with whipped cream, right?”

“Huh? Oh, yes!”

Gi-Na answered as loud and clear as possible, all frozen up by Kang-Joon.

“No need to be scared. I’m not a cop.”

Kang-Joon thought it might be handy for him to get a fake police badge somewhere but that was something to worry about later. Gi-Na had a lot of questions for him.

How he got to her, what he meant by something related to her life, why he wanted to find her to start with and how he knew about her ability...all these questions were about to burst out of her head.

She had already forgotten about their encounter in the Core situation at Gangnam station.

‘Hmm...there’s a lot of questions I want to ask as well but...’

Kang-Joon also had so many questions popping in his head. Who this girl really was, why she would make no contact with the firms and decide to be on her own with no license...but he decided to talk about all that a bit later.

Now was the time for him to give her a shock. Whatever he was about to say, it would be easier for him to lead the conversation after he stirred her up a little bit.

“Gi-Na, if you keep doing this, you will die in five years.”

As Kang-Joon predicted, she indeed was dramatically stirred.

“.....what...are you trying to say?”

“Do you feel any sort of a random headache or dizziness? Doesn’t your body feel lethargic when you wake up in the morning?”

“Yes....Yes...my body just feels really heavy like I’m wearing soaked clothes in the morning.”

“

Well, I’m sorry to say this but...since this is a serious topic I hope

you understand. Your period has not been so regular right? You were losing your appetite at one moment then all of a sudden you went on a binge and stuff, right?”

“H...how did you! How do you know it that well?”

“That’s a side effect from excessive usage of Avatar. I think it’s more serious than I expected. With this pace, it’s probably not even five but three...”

With that, Gi-Na’s face was turning almost plain white. Kang-Joon had the most serious look on his face, making Gi-Na also very serious. She was almost tearing up, about to burst anytime soon.

Of course, those symptoms mentioned by Kang-Joon were simply from overwork and tiredness.

She must’ve had a day job then she got on the subway after the work. Especially on the weekend, she was staying on it almost during the whole day.

There was no doubt that she would be terribly tired. Hence, she was, in fact, suffering from the overwork and what Kang-Joon mentioned was merely a list of symptoms that could be caused by that. Even if it wasn’t overworked, everybody wakes up with a tired body in the morning.

‘Gullible, huh.’

Even before he actually began, he instinctively felt that she was almost falling over into his hands. He opened up his phone then started watching the video footages of Acacia.

Cutting through dimension with telekinesis and crushing the monsters with her cheap looking wand also using her telekinetic power was indeed something beyond normal.

Regardless of all that, Gi-Na was feeling so humiliated that she could almost bite her own tongue, watching the very footages of herself with another person. The reason being...

[Leovoltic Thunderstorm!]

She was spitting out that kind of nonsense, with all of her heart and passion. As a contrast to the name ‘Thunderstorm’, she was making sparks from the asphalt ground by scratching it with telekinetic pressure.

It barely had anything to do with doing some damage to the actual target. However, Kang-Joon was still keeping his serious face. He did not sneer or make fun of anything. Instead, He opened his mouth again.

“The power you are using in these videos is at least S-Class or SS-Class at maximum.”

Gi-Na was doing what she could do and she made some unnecessary moves to show off. Having absolutely no knowledge of the hunting industry, she had no idea which class her powers would belong to.

“Don’t you find it weird, though? Even the Awakes with the best talents can’t use this kind of power on this scale without absorbing a massive amount of Aether. Have you ever absorbed Aether before?”

“No...Nope...”

Aether crystals are used as power sources for weapons but the Awakes could absorb in into their bodies to enhance their powers.

“It doesn’t make sense that there is no cost for this kind of power. Right now you are using this power because you are burning your life as a fuel. With this pace, not too long after, the link between your body and your spirit will cut off which would make your spirit go on a rampage and your body die from heart attack. I have witnessed a few people like with Avatar ability and their end...was not so pretty.”

Kang-Joon frowned right after that.

Avatar ability is something very rare and hence Gi-Na could not

find anything about her own power when she tried to search through the internet. There is a lot of secrets around the abilities of the Awakes but it is almost impossible to find nothing about even the type of power.

To start with, it is compulsory for the Awakes, once they came to recognize their ability, to be quarantined to the managing facility and have their power tested and measured in detail.

That's simply because it is handier for the government to be aware of different types of people with powers.

There is a lot of creepy rumors around that facility. Most of them are on an urban myth level, such as 'they dissect the brains of the Awake at the facility'. Yet, they were more than enough to make Gi-Na scared. Hence, she decided not to register.

Kang-Joon knew very well about this kind of people. A power too strong is easily seen as a threat, and the person with such power was kept away in the facility, forced to live under restricted conditions until they were confirmed to have complete control over their power.

Should they be considered to be not able to control the power properly and hence there was a risk of them being a threat to the society, there were cases where they have locked away in the facility forever.

Like any other myths, the rumors did not come from nowhere. Gi-Na's fear of the facility was entirely normal and natural.

So, The Magical Girl Acacia, as well as a hero to the public, was an unregistered Awake which the government was chasing after. With such a cute nickname, she was almost a dark hero.

"Wh, what do I do then...?"

"Well, I guess we can start talking now."

Kang-Joon pulled out his business card. Miss Seol made them for him in hopes that they will be useful sometime later.

“I’m actually a manager at Hero Management Inc.”

“Oh...”

Gi-Na then finally came to doubt Kan-Joon’s motives. It was a known fact that different firms were trying day and night to get to her and her, of course, knew it.

There was so many managers who were trying to promote themselves to her with a big amount of deposit. As she came to think that the man in front of her was no one but a manager who was trying to get her in for the sake of his company, she could not hide her feelings but be disappointed.

“Managers obviously take care of hunters. You are using your power way too uncontrollably. I do not know what kind of motivation you have been hunting with and I do not want to know or judge your decision. But, things are dangerous for you like this.”

Kang-Joon gave her a serious look.

“You do not yet know about your power well. I have witnessed a few people with power like yours and I know the secrets and the problems of it. I, for sure, can tell you all that. You need somebody to take care of you right now. Also...”

Kang-Joon, with a confident look, moved on to confirm his statement

“I don’t know about other countries, especially Canada, but you got to know that I am the only one who even knows about this ability in entire Korea.”

Then, he opened his wallet, pulling out his hunter ID.

“I’m working as a manager now, but a B-Class hunter at the same time.”

Gi-Na could not really decide whether or not she should believe this guy who smelled like fraud head to toe.

“Please, have a think about it and contact me. What you have

been doing is dangerous. For your body and for the society as well.”

After the last words, Kang-Joon left his spot only to return seconds later.

“Oops, almost left my coffee.”

To Gi-Na, Kang-Joon indeed was weird in a lot of different ways.

After meeting Kang-Joon, Gi-Na headed back home with heavy steps. Just like any other day, she took the subway. When she met him, although she was fooled by a wicked trick, she had no choice but to admit what he said was mostly true.

Above everything, she was surprised that he noticed her true ability which no one ever knew about. Also, after hearing it from him, she was thinking maybe she really only had maximum five years, minimum three years of her life left.

At first, she thought it was a dream. Being able to use those supernatural power is indeed a daydream for most of the people.

In the dream, she was walking through a small park near her house and swayed her arm towards a streetlight, thinking she wanted to have a supernatural power.

When she did that, the very streetlight right before her eyes got bent like a spoon in a split second. The feeling was so real that she woke up right away started.

When she later checked, the streetlight was really bent and broken. She came to recognize her ability as if she was dreaming and finally realized that her ability was something very odd.

It took a fair bit of time for her to get to the point where she could use the power whenever she wanted with a little concentration. She used to glide through the air using her Avatar.

It was still scary for her to register herself at the managing facility. Since she could find nothing about her ability anywhere,

she feared that she might really be locked in the facility forever as an example. Because of that, she told nobody about her power.

After graduating from a university in Seoul, she did a few internships at book publishing companies and became a full-timer not too long after. She was a part of the accounting team which had barely anything to do with books and publishing, so her daily job was just a boredom for her.

She used to wonder if this really is all there is for her life more than ten times a day. Even if she quit, someone else would fill up her spot right away. She felt like a cog in a giant machine called society.

She had always been trying to become something but before she even realized, she had already become something else. So, she felt like there was no longer a chance for her to become someone different.

Like a finished statue, she thought she would just get older and older with nothing really changing in her life.

Having nothing to expect of the future was miserable. She could not even open up her worries towards those friends of her who could not even find a full-time job.

To them, it was obvious that her worries would just sound like a spoiled child complaining. Happiness was subjective and so was unhappiness.

The only entertainment in her life was to summon the Avatar to walk through the night, fly in the air and try out her powers.

Deciding to hunt down monsters was a simple thing. There was a Core Situation around her place and she popped up crushing the monsters with her Avatar just for fun.

The disgust was nothing compared to the realization of her great power and the acclamation from people. That's when she came to notice what she needed and what she had lacked

She wanted to feel alive. Killing monsters and seeing people cheer was enough for her. Doing good deeds for people could really make her feel alive. Hunters make money off such activities but she chose not to.

Getting the appreciations from the soldiers and the hunters was just enough.

So, she decided to change the appearance of her Avatar. Letting her Avatar look exactly like her could lead to people noticing her. That's why she changed it to her childhood self.

Then, she came to think maybe the concept of Magical Girl would not be too bad and eventually...

Acacia, The Magical Girl was born.

Chapter 10 - Avatar (3)

She could barely sleep. Yet, she was happy enough that she still helped someone out. For the first time, she came to recognize there was such a sense of justice within her. Acting out as the Magical Girl and talking nonsense was so entertaining.

In a way, her destructive activities was a method for her to resolve the stress she was getting from work.

Doing something good for the society was really just an extra thing. Every time she bashed the monsters down, Acacia was, in fact, imagining she was beating her boss to death.

Of course, nobody really knew what she was actually thinking so it did not really matter for anyone.

The life as Acacia had been going on for six months and although her stress was resolved, acting as Acacia had become somewhat of an obligation to her.

People expected Acacia to pop up on the scene and she had to sacrifice all her free time to get on the subway, keeping to that expectation.

It was tiring and her head was spinning inside all day yet it was doable. In fact, the moments when she was not Acacia had become more boring and meaningless for her.

However, the fact that her power was actually fuelled by her own life was something she could not believe so easily. Kang-Joon's suggestions and warning were indeed startling yet she could not wholly trust someone she had only met for the first time.

‘He must be lying. I’ve seen the cases of management firms trapping hunters with fraud on news. He must be a fraud...’

The so-called ‘Slavery Contract’ done by some management firms is very famous even to the public. The blacklist of toxic managements which hunters should avoid is updated real-time,

frequently.

Of course, she was only aware of the facts exposed to the public through the news media but she knew for sure that there are corrupted managements that rip off the hunters.

So she came to think that there was nothing good in trusting the words of someone she did not even know. With more concerns filling up her head, she blankly listened to the spreading sound of the siren along the road.

[Warning, Warning. There has been a C-Rank Core wave detected near Sindorim Hyundai Department Store. The unit in charge is on the move right now. Civilians and workers near the area, please be obedient to the control of the army within the operation zone. Warning, Warning...]

For the warnings below B-Rank, there is no evacuation order as the situation can be resolved fairly quick and easily. Even on the subway, there is only a warning announcement for such situations and the subway itself sometimes even stops at the stations without bypassing unless the Core zone is very close.

Due to the large population, an abnormal phenomenon in Seoul is frequent and if there is an evacuation order for every single situation, there is a possibility of the whole society being paralyzed.

The public got used to the phenomenon and the adequate systems have been setup.

However, Gi-Na has not done today's good deed yet. No one knows what could happen if B-Rank monsters started flooding out of a Core with D-Rank wave like last time.

Speeding up her steps, she walked into a café nearby. After getting her drink, she fell right onto her table. The Magical Girl Acacia was still in action.

“Hmmm...”

Resolving the situation was easy. Grabbing her drink which was half melted, she walked out and continued her way back home. Still, the soldiers and the hunters were appreciative of her help.

If she stepped into the Core distribution process and claimed her share, it would have broken out to a dispute regarding the trespassing and intervention of designated areas.

In fact, she well knew that the only reason why those management firms did not have any problem with her hunting in their areas was because she did not ever claim any of the rewards from the hunt. About that, she was rather skeptical.

Actually, there was no place where she was really needed. She knew that. Solving a problem that would have been solved one way or another was not really doing a good deed for anyone.

The situations at different places were resolved by other people yet she intervened like an unwanted guest, stomped on the monsters as she wanted and disappeared into thin air.

It was obvious that she would have to be in a conflict with the hunters in the area if she ever claimed anything

These days, her focus has been more on the fancy destruction than helping others. She did not like seeing herself shifting away from her original purpose.

With her head being filled with more thoughts, Gi-Na was walking back home. All of a sudden, she felt her head being very light. Next moment, something flooded out from her inside.

Stumbling down to the ground, she barely leaned onto a wall and held herself up. Opening her hands, she could see what came out of her mouth with a cough.

“Blood...”

Her right hand was covered in red. Still feeling the last bit of the dizziness, she stood back up straight.

She came to think that maybe she was just being plain stupid. Nobody ever said they really needed her. She was just giving away free income to the hunters and enjoying the cheer of the people as if she was thirsty for their attention.

No one would say it was the wrong decision yet it could not be seen to be right as well. She did not quite know what coughing blood really indicated but it was obvious that there was something wrong with her body. She came to be reminded of Kang-Joon's words.

‘Gi-Na, what you are doing now is dangerous. Both for your body and... society.’

She then came to think maybe she is just an unnecessary piece that is trying to shove itself into the already complete, well-functioning world. The world did not need heroes.

The words from Kang-Joon woke Gi-Na up. With the coughing of the blood, she came to see the paradox she had been carrying in herself.

‘What...should I do?’

Living as the Magical Girl, she was getting used to only destruction and killing. She was well aware of the danger that once she went one step wrong, she would turn into a mass killing machine and nothing more.

Even at that moment, the government was moving as quick as possible to find Acacia, the unregistered hunter.

Standing in front of the door to her room, she hesitated for a bit. Wiping the blood off her hand and onto her tracksuit, she picked up her phone then contacted Kang-Joon right away.

After a few signals, Kang-Joon picked up

“I need to ask you a few things.”

“Go ahead.”

Even with the sudden phone call, Kang-Joon answered calmly.

“Can we meet right now?”

“Sure. Where are you right now?”

Disregarding all the management firm stuff, she wanted to ask someone what she needed to do. Ironically, the only person she could really talk to was not her family or even friends, but a guy who she had just met for the first time.

They met up later that night, they sat down at a café and talked for a long time. The next day was a Sunday so both of them had a lot of time in their hands.

Gi-Na opened up to Kang-Joon and came to confess all the agonies and struggles she had been carrying and why she had been hunting as the Magical Girl.

Kang-Joon did not say or advise much about anything. Just nodding his head, he acknowledged the struggles Gi-Na was going through.

‘Yea, I see.’

‘That must’ve been tough.’

‘I think that sometimes as well.’

His responses were simple yet he never stopped being open and positive throughout the conversation.

By the end of her confession, the outside was already brightening up. Gi-Na never really knew that she was a type of person who could talk that much and that long.

By the time all the talk was over, Gi-Na was just plainly looking into the empty cup of hers.

As she let everything that was building inside her flood out, there was nothing more for her to say. She was almost like a bottle that flooded out all the water it was containing.

Looking at Gi-Na, Kang-Joon put on a small smile.

“What if you became a real hunter?”

“Huh? Bu..but I’m scared to go into that managing facility.... Once they came to find out about me they even might sue me for all the things I’ve done as Acacia...”

“I know a way around this kind of problem, though.”

Grabbing his straw, Kang-Joon gave it a little spin.

“First of all, just register as a pure hunter. There is no restriction for anyone to submit a form. Once you resolve any sort of situation with No-Class hunter certificate, an F-Class one will come out right away. Since then, you are a legitimate hunter.”

“What should I do after that?”

“Once you get your first hunter ID, the classification for you is almost over. So even if you use your powers as an Awake, your hunter ID will sort of protect you from all the problems. The classification of the hunters in our country is pretty loose so they group the Knights and the Mutants together and the pure Hunters with the Awakes. After the Returners appeared, they have been pretty tough only on those people and the Awakes are kind of set loose.”

Once Kang-Joon pulled out his expertise in the field, Gi-Na felt her concentration all scattering away. Yet, she had to leave everything to him about this kind of industry-related problems.

“So...”

Kang-Joon again put on a subtle smile at her.

“You will have to sign a contract first. If you are under a care from a firm rather than being a freelancer, the firm will represent you for most of the situations and you won’t really have to do anything.”

“I...might go to one of those massive firms. Why are you telling

me all this?”

To Kang-Joon who was giving away the tips Gi-Na never knew about, she asked.

“Like I said. I’m the only manager in this entire country who can manage a person with The Avatar ability. I mean, if you are happy to regret...”

Kang-Joon was not lying this time and it would only be Gi-Na’s loss if she did not trust him.

Above all, she needed someone to diagnose her current state, especially after her vomiting up blood. Looking at Kang-Joon cautiously, she finally nodded her head slowly.

“...I’ll...sign it.”

Then, she had to figure out how she would submit her resignation at work.

The next Monday, Kang-Joon turned up at the office with Gi-Na, who needed to urgently use her leave, and signed the contract.

Miss Seol still was not convinced that Gi-Na really was Acacia so she needed to use her ability right before Miss Seol’s eyes. Having appeared as the little Magical Girl, Gi-Na was embarrassed to death and looked at her sleeping self strangely.

Once the contract was done, Gi-Na said that her first real day at the firm would be a little later as she needed to tidy up her current job.

Gi-Na came back to her work and put the management on hold until her resignation was processed and her job was passed over successfully to the next person. Kang-Joon made sure he warned Gi-Na that she should never appear as Acacia anymore.

***(E/N: Flashback over)

Having listened to the whole story told by Kang-Joon, Miss Seol shakes her head left and right, still shocked by everything that she

saw and heard. The Finance manager is still snoring in his seat(E/N: where do I sign up to be a “Finance manager), completely unaware of what is going on in the office.

Whether the Magical Girl who has been making the industry rather noisy is sitting right in his office or not, it seems more important to him that he makes up for all the sleep he missed out on.

“I don’t believe this...I really don’t...”

“What?”

“It just doesn’t make sense that Acacia, that Acacia who every management has been longing after, just signed with us. This is one of your bullshit rights? Is this some sort of a prank? Man... Kang-Joon, what really are you? Did you really just bring in the Magical Girl into the office in ten days?”

“Well, I’m the manager you employed.”

Chapter 11 - There Is A Reason For An Unconditional Favour (1)

“A...are you for real? No way...you’re lying again, aren’t you?”

“I don’t play around with someone’s life.”

Miss Seol could not really fully understand how much weight that statement from Kang-Joon carries. In the world of hunters, especially for those wandering around the whole world with no particular place to stay, murder is never something too far away. Intimidated a little bit, Miss Seol just nods her head.

“Oh...oh yes. I’m sorry.”

“Well, even that was kind of a lie, to be honest.”

“Huh?”

Looking at Kang-Joon flipping his attitude, Miss Seol frowns a little.

“Well, The Awakes enhance their power by absorbing Aether right? If she absorbs a large amount, she should be able to make up for the life she’s been burning off.”

“How much would she need?”

“Hmmm...”

Kang-Joon casually opens up his palm, stretching his five fingers out.

“Probably about 50 Million worth.”

The power used by Avatar users requires something rather big in return. Hence, getting back from the internal damage caused by the excessive use of power is not quite easy as well. So, what Kang-Joon is saying right now is somewhat of a lie and somewhat of a truth. 50 million is hard to be even described as ‘a lot’ of money. It is a tremendous amount. To switch up the mood, Miss Seol tries to

put on a smile.

“Well...Well... guess it’s all good for the business! Why don’t we all go and have a meal together? There’s no job left to do today, right?”

“I’m keen.”

Kang-Joon smiles as Miss Seol shakes up Finance Manager Song, who’s been snoring the whole time.

“Song, let’s go eat up.”

“Uhhh...yea...are we done for the day?”

“There’s no job anyways. So why don’t we leave a little early?”

“I’ll just head home then, thanks.”

Finance Manager Song, who has slept through the whole day since the moment he got into the office, packs his stuff one by one and stands up from his seat.

“Got something urgent to do?”

“I bought PS4.”

“Oh...alright...”

Miss Seol gives him a nod. Then Song storms out of the office right away. Kang-Joon, looking at Song’s empty seat, tilts his head a little bit.

“Well...free and casual atmosphere, huh?”

“Ha, ha...haha...we...well he is someone our company really needs.”

Though Miss Seol avoids to really say what Song is needed for, Kang-Joon does not really want to ask her in detail anyway.

“What should we have?”

“I’m keen for Korean Beef.”

“Well what about American...”

“Good day today. You told me you got money, right?”

“O...ok! Good day today! Korean Beef it is!”

Triggered by Kang-Joon, Miss Seol comes to think that maybe she is starting to be swayed around by him even though she is the boss. They head their way to have some Korean Beef with a few drinks with Miss Seol's suggestion. Miss Seol, after a few shots, shows her gladness about the new recruit with an excited face.

“I, I...still know a lot of people in this scene and got some good connections here and there... It's just we didn't have any chances to use it... Baaaaaack then I was running like thirty teams... Seocho, Hannam and Eijeongbu were entirely our areas...”

“Boss, you crying right now?”

“N...no... course I'm not! It's a good day. Thanks to you, I'm getting a feeling that everything's going to work out fine. I've never seen or heard any new manager signing a hunter that big...”

“It's going to happen frequently from now on.”

To form a team, they still need a least two more people and Kang-Joon is ready to go get them no matter what. Miss Seol laughs off Kang-Joon's confidence saying that it is ridiculous. Yet, she feels that maybe, maybe this exceptional new manager can really pull anything off.

Hero Management Inc. might have received the best surprise gift called Kang-Joon. However, Kang-Joon is no fool about this industry. All the connections of Miss Seol will one day become Kang-Joon's infrastructure. From legal advisers to accounting, equipment factories and exchange of the resources to cash, there is a lot of things to learn to start off the business. Starting with no prior knowledge would only mean a big waste of money and failure.

The conversation continues on and on with Korean Beef grilling until the sun starts to hide away. Miss Seol is good with drinks, so

is Kang-Joon.

“Hmmm, I really have never heard of such ability as Avatar, though.”

“It surely is rare.”

“Knew anyone with that ability?”

“.....Yes.”

“Then that person must’ve... Oh, I’m sorry. I...I must be drunk...”

Seeing Kang-Joon’s face turning stiff as she brings out the question, Miss Seol shuts herself up. Then, Kang-Joon lifts his shoulders up a little, as if he tries to say there’s nothing wrong with asking.

“Don’t be. I know that much about Gi-Na’s ability because I knew someone who died because of that power.”

Kang-Joon still remembers the scene with the spirit running rampage when he was in the North Pole area. Surely, it is a memory he does not enjoy recalling at all. The scene of someone who was a good partner minute ago turning wild all of a sudden, destroying the surroundings while throwing the power everywhere and tearing another comrade apart was nothing but the pit of hell itself.

“Avatar users are dangerous. Even if it’s not us, someone needs to take care of them and if someone was to do it anyway, I’d be the best fit since I know more than anyone else.”

The Awakes, when they fail to control their power or their emotions properly, they always carry a risk to run rampage. Such rampage is lethal and dangerous for everybody. Especially if a power like Avatar runs wild, the disaster that would come out of it is beyond imagination. Miss Seol instinctively feels that one of Kang-Joon’s partners must have gone wild.

“If such a scene happens... what do we do?”

It is no longer something rude for her to ask, as the CEO of the management which signed a hunter with such ability, she holds the rights to know about the topic. Kang-Joon casually answers.

“It’s difficult to get rid of the Avatar itself so the unprotected controller has to be terminated.”

In cases of Avatar spirit running wild, that would be the best resolution. Of course, it is on the assumption that the Avatar user has not woken up to their real power yet...Kang-Joon, saying no more words, gulps down a shot and Miss Seol comes to recognise the snippet of emotion from Kang-Joon’s face. Recognising, Miss Seol’s stare, Kang-Joon puts on a smile.

“I must be a little drunk.”

Probably because he has not been drunk in a while, his true emotions showed up on his face for a split second. Miss Seol cannot still figure out who that Avatar user might have been.

Yet,

She can sense that the very person who killed the controller is probably Kang-Joon. Coming back to his normal face, Kang-Joon is picking up a few pieces of meat with a bitter smile. Miss Seol comes to think Kang-Joon may be more of a complicated person than she thought.

However, this is no time for her to worry about Kang-Joon. Hero Management Inc. has finally signed a hunter after three months of downfall and today is the day to celebrate. Filling up Kang-Joon’s glass, Miss Seol opens her mouth.

“One more?”

“Drinking irresponsibly is never good.”

“Well, if we don’t feel alright tomorrow, we’ll just close!”

“Someone’s lazy....”

“Lazy...? I’m filled with motivation right now!”

Yet, Kang-Joon clinks his glass to Miss Seol’s.

Gi-Na is still on hold as she is looking for someone to hand the job over so there is a few days left until she gets the legitimate hunter ID and starts working. The biggest change is Miss Seol, who has been very idle until Kang-Joon brought in Gi-Na.

The Finance Manger Song, as usual, has been doing an exceptional job at being nobody in the office. Possibly staying up all night playing games, his day at the office, majority of the time, is just slept away. Despite all that, Miss Seol does not really do anything about him. There must be some sort of a secret between the two yet Kang-Joon does not feel the need to find out.

With the new hunter signed, Miss Seol, really filled with motivation, has been moving fast calling up the equipment factories and contacting here and there. Her statement about the connections was not a lie and she surely has been busy calling up different people.

“Oh, Mr. Choi, how are you doing? Yes, it’s Seol. Yes. Yes. Oh, we signed a new hunter. We’re going to put together a team soon. About time we stand back up. This new guy just brought me a massive surprise. It all feels like a dream you know? Ah, haha, stop joking around...huh? Is, is this really a dream?”

With an attitude hard to be defined either of business or chatter, Miss Seol keeps calling up different people, soon to let out a scream of joy.

“Yep, Huh?! Really? Are you for real? Wow, thank you! I’ll never forget this!”

Hanging up, she runs towards Kang-Joon and throws up a victory sign with her fingers with her eyes twinkling. She almost looks like a younger sister playing cute with her brother, rather than a CEO of a firm who is in her late thirties.

“Kang-Joon! I did it!”

“Anything good?”

“I just called up the CEO of this factory called ‘The Crescent’ and they’ll send us a used set of Aether devices as a cheer-up gift! With three Armour Coats as well! They are all charged up so we should be able to use it right away!”

Aether devices are those run on Aether, which can be extracted from the monsters in dungeon.

Dungeon monsters, have a surprisingly great defence ability in general. It is to the point where, beyond a particular rank, normal fire weapons do not work on them at all. Extracted from those monsters, the milky crystal called Aether lets out a strong wave of energy and that energy in particular has proven itself to work great against any monsters including those in the dungeons. The crystals can be manufactured into different attacking devices such as sword, the most basic form, to spear, bow, needle, claw and blaster.

For the hunters, especially the Pure Hunters and the Knights, it is an absolute necessity.

Above everything, Armour Coats, since they provide a great defence, could be more important than weapons.

Even the Aether weapons with the lowest quality are sold for well over a thousand and the ones the hunters can really trust and use for a while go well over ten times that.

Armour Coats, which require the Cube, rarest of the energy crystals (Aether, Cube, Core), are even more expensive than that. The lowest quality ones are easily over three thousand.

Both the weapons and the Armour Coats, high quality ones do not even have a set price. So, Miss Seol supposedly just made more than ten thousand for free. However, Kang-Joon looks back at her, unimpressed.

“Huh? Is there something on my face?”

“Boss, are you tight with that person from The Crescent?”

“Hmm... we did some deals back in the days. Haven’t contacted them a lot these days, of course.”

“Their gift, I don’t think it’s a very good idea.”

“Why is that?”

Kang-Joon does not know quite well about the management industry. But, like everyone does, he carries a few mottos in his spirit which he lives by. Calmly, he talks to Miss Seol, who is questioningly looking at him.

“There is a reason for an unconditional favour.”

“Are you saying they have a hidden motto?”

“Well, not sure if it’s a hidden motto or whatever...”

Sipping his coffee, Kang-Joon tilts his head.

“Once the equipment gets here, I’ll check on it.”

As a veteran hunter, Kang-Joon has held all kinds of hunter equipment and gone through everything from the lowest quality to the high-end products. He knows how to do a general check-up, basic assembly and easy fixes.

The set of equipment is delivered to the office two days later with the postage paid. In the box are three sets of equipment and Kang-Joon lays them out one by one with Miss Seol watching him.

It contains three of Aether swords and three of old-style Armour Coats.

“Hmm..”

“Why? Is there any problems?”

“No, it’s just... they are way too clean.”

As if they have done some good washing and a thorough check-

up, the three sets of equipment, though they may be old, look dirt-free clean. If they are old enough to lose profitability and therefore sent to someone for free, Kang-Joon expected the packing to be a little loose and clumsy yet they are looking better than his expectation. Of course, as they are sent as a gift, there is nothing weird about doing a check-up on them as a favour for the future users.

“Let’s head to the rooftop.”

“Alright.”

Carrying the equipment, they get to the rooftop of the building. There is a group of people smoking around the edge of the empty space. As Kang-Joon and Miss Seol get there, they look at the two interestingly.

“Step back a little bit.”

“Oh, alright.”

Holding the handle of Aether sword, Kang-Joon activates the blade straight away.

Milky blade comes flooding out of the handle and Kang-Joon sways the sword left and right casually. With him handling such a dangerous weapon so casually, Miss Seol’s face goes blank.

“Wh, what are you doing? Be careful!”

Aether swords are not only strong against the monsters, but really against anything. Quite literally, Aether swords are like lightsabers, cutting through almost everything they touch like a knife cutting through a piece of onion. The only difference is that they are not simply a cluster of plasma in the shape of a blade, but a real blade with its physical form by the energy from Aether. So the user can feel the strikes and the slashes to their hands.

Recognising a random mad person swinging an Aether sword, other people hurry their way back into the building. Only Kang-Joon and Miss Seol remain standing on the rooftop.

Although the weapon has jumped over the rules of physics and technology in many different aspects, there is no denying that it is the best weapon to fight against the monsters. The best sword of this time is no more than a blunt piece of metal compared to the sharpness of the lowest quality Aether sword.

Kang-Joon, bravely, touches the side of the blade and looks carefully around the handle. Then, He throws it away to the corner of the rooftop activated. Miss Seol carefully asks.

“How is it?”

“Capacity wise, it’s hard to say it is the lowest quality. It seems pretty good.”

“Wow! Awesome!”

“We’ll leave it on until it runs out.”

“Huh? Why would we want to waste the energy?”

Aether devices, obviously, run on charged Aether and once they run flat, they do not work anymore. Aether is an expensive type of resource and continuous usage of Aether devices means continuous loss of money. What Kang-Joon is doing is almost like leaving the car running until it runs out on its fuel. Of course, Miss Seol is surprised. Additionally, the price of gasoline and Aether is nothing to be compared against each other anyway.

Whether Miss Seol is questioning or not Kang-Joon does what he needs to do. Then, he goes on to try out the Armour Coat. Putting the Coat on then activating it, blue field starts to generate around Kang-Joon. Although the defence provided by the Armour Coat itself is great, the user could activate an Armour Field around them to generate a blue force field to protect them from damage in every direction.

Requiring Cube, which can only be obtained in the Pocket Dimension, Armour Coats are great means of defence for any type of hunters.

“Seems to have no temperature control...Boss, throw something heavy at me.”

“Heavy?”

“Yea, as hard as you can.”

Miss Seol comes back with a paving block.

“Uh, why do they have that on the rooftop?”

“Leftover from that little garden construction thing they used to do, I guess. Should I throw it?”

Hesitating whether or not he should trust this old Armour Coat, Kang-Joon nods his head with a stiff face.

“Throw it hard?”

“Yea. As hard as you can.”

“Alright...!”

Miss Seol throws the brick with all her strength. It flies right into Kang-Joon’s face. Then,

“!”

Kang-Joon notices the flickering and decaying of the light-blue force field in front of his eyes.

It’s a matter of a split second. Getting hit by a brick in the face would lead to severe injury at least and death at the worst. However, Kang-Joon is a veteran hunter.

In those moments, Kang-Joon pulls out his Aether sword from his waist, smashing the brick with the side of the blade. As soon as the side comes in contact with the brick, the brick explodes into pieces like a balloon. Miss Seol, completely forgetting what she threw the brick for, drops her jaw wide then gives Kang-Joon a clap.

Smashing away a brick which is flying right into the face with no prior preparation is obviously not a stunt that anyone can pull off.

“Th, that was amazing...”

Kang-Joon, barely out of the panic, lets out a few heavy breaths.

Chapter 12 - There Is A Reason For An Unconditional Favour (2)

Ever since Kang-Joon came back to Korea, he had never experienced such a life threatening event. In the middle of of her oblivious applause, Miss Seol abruptly realises something and hastily lifts her head towards Kang-Joon.

“Kang-Joon....Were you trying to show me that stunt all along?”

“N...No...”

Kang-Joon hastily deactivates his Aether Sword, putting it back on his thigh. Subsequently, he takes off his Armour Coat, activates the force field and thrusts it into the air...

Only to slam his leg into it.

“Wh...What?!”

With a horrendous sound, the force field crumbles. Kang-Joon’s mouth was agape as he blankly stared at the coat.

“Faulty stuff...”

“It seems so...”

Kang-Joon’s kick, although stronger than a normal person’s, was still only a kick of a human. Even mid-quality Armour Coats was able to block bullets from a combat rifle when activated. If an Armour Coat was able to be destroyed by a normal kick, it is no more than a suit of metal armour from the medieval days. However, Miss Seol seemed to be furious because of Kang-Joon’s actions.

“At the very least, be careful! It could have snapped your ankle! You horrified me!”

“Well... It didn’t snap.”

If the Armour Coat had actually worked properly, the force field

would've broken Kang-Joon's foot when he kicked it away.

"But what if it did?!"

"Well, it didn't."

"....Ugh, no point arguing with you. Please, don't make me worry."

Kang-Joon's face suddenly tenses up. Recognising the change in his expression, Miss Seol stares at him.

"Kang-Joon, are you angry?"

"Ah, no... i was just thinking of something..."

The expression on his face changed as she was chiding him in order to stop making her worry. Afterwards, Kang-Joon doesn't say anything further.

However...

The Aether sword in the corner of the room suddenly starts to vibrate vigorously. Laying on the floor, the blade of the sword flickered as if it was a flame out of the handle, with the vibration getting more extreme by every second. As soon as Kang-Joon recognises that, he snatches the sword from the ground then throws it into the air right away.

"Get down!"

"Huh, what! Oh my God!"

Kang-Joon rushes towards Miss Seol then gets down on the ground with her below him. Then, he activates the Force Field of his Shield Bracelet, forming the blue protective field around them. Miss Seol, still under Kang-Joon, screams out.

"Wh...What are you doing?!"

Yet, her scream and attempts to get out of Kang-Joon's hold does not last too long.

The Aether sword in the air then makes a giant explosion with

white rays of light inside it. Even though the impact was not too severe on the ground – only enough to make the grass sway a little bit – as Kang-Joon threw it rather high up into the air. However it seemed to be big enough to turn the two into ashes if it happened on the ground.

The impact of the explosion goes away in a few seconds. Kang-Joon soon gets himself up, brushing his clothes off. Miss Seol, still on the floor, with a stupid look on her face. Kang-Joon reaches out towards her with his hand.

“Are you alright?”

“Uh, oh...yes, yes...I’m ok. Thank you...”

Miss Seol quivers as she sees a splinter of the handle of the Aether sword which pierced through a brick. If it had been someone’s head or chest, killing that person with such a splinter would not have been too hard. Thanks to the Protective Field, the two did not get a scratch.

“Wh, what...what the heck is this?”

“Faulty stuff.”

The sound of the explosion was rather loud, it was possible that some people in the building heard the impact. Yet, the actual damage is only some splinters here and there on the tree and bricks. Kang-Joon, frowns hard with an unusual angry look on his face.

“And, this was intentional.”

“Huh?”

“I know because I’ve been through this once.”

Then, he looks around, points his finger at the door back into the building.

“By the way, let’s get out of here first.”

“Sounds like a good idea!”

No matter what, someone would come up to the rooftop because of the impact from the explosion. Miss Seol's heart is still running fast, due to complicated reasons.

Coming back to the office, they started to converse at a table.

"I'm no expert so I can't quite see how the circuit's working. Maybe with some equipment, but that would only be possible at a specialised factory."

Aether devices are extremely complicated. With no expertise, Kang-Joon could not quite specify what caused the explosion in the device.

"Back in the days, when I was in South America, I got my stuff serviced at this dodgy place."

"...huh?"

As Kang-Joon starts talking about a random place, Miss Seol reacts fatuously.

"But, after a while, the sword started shaking like just then, leading to a massive explosion. I was in a B-Rank dungeon. No one really got hurt severely but if it happened in a civilian area, the damage would have been horrific."

Just then, the damage was small only because Kang-Joon predicted the explosion. If it happened while a hunter was holding the sword, the outcome would have been either death by the explosion or death by the monsters after losing the weapon.

"Then, I thought about it after I got out of the dungeon...I actually had some conflicts with local gangsters before the servicing."

With the story seemingly going places, Miss Seol seems shocked with her jaws dropped at the fact that Kang-Joon was going around the world fighting gangsters.

"We weren't really equipped properly that day. Armour Coats

just tire you because they are so heavy, you know? Oh, you wouldn't know...anyway, it makes you tired. So without the equipment, they thought we were some sort of tourists so they tried to rob us and we only reacted to that...they were holding guns so we cut away their arms, then they ran."

Casually saying he cut someone's arms away, Miss Seol suddenly feels chills down her spine. Yet, as she imagines Kang-Joon running through the bullets and dodging them, she again drops her jaw out of amaze as if she is picturing a scene from an action movie.

"No, come on. I'm not some sort of a Samurai. I got this bracelet, you know."

Kang-Joon's bracelet is almost a small, compact version of Armour Coat. Because he never took the bracelet off, he was able to manage the situation smoothly. In fact, even without Kang-Joon's bracelet, a Knight with fair bit of experience can easily deflect bullets with their bare bodies as well.

"Did that mechanic have to do with anything?"

"Yea, that mechanic was a brother of one of the guys who lost their arms."

"S...So? What did you do?"

Forgetting the real reason why Kang-Joon brought up the story, Miss Seol asks with a face full of curiosity.

"That's...not really important in this story."

"Oh yea...true."

Kang-Joon sighs at Miss Seol's disappointed look.

"I punished him so he would never be able to do such a thing again."

"Did...did you kill him?"

"No, you think I'm a maniac or something? I cut all his fingers

off except his thumbs and pinkies, then crushed them so he wouldn't get them back together."

"...You're more of a maniac than I thought."

"I almost died from that explosion. He should be thankful. I didn't even actually do that myself. Everyone else was just going crazy trying to kill him, but I still held them back."

To his weird logic, Miss Seol feels herself getting confused even more. Even though she has been working in this hunter-related industry, she cannot seem to fully understand how hunters' minds work. Above that, freelancer hunters who have been around the whole world are people way beyond her understanding.

Because the story sounded way too distant, Miss Seol does not even come to be scared of Kang-Joon, who is sitting right in front of her.

"Who cut those fingers off them?"

"Huh? Ah...well, somebody."

'Motherfuckers! I'm going to bash their fucking heads into press machine and mash them down good!'

Kang-Joon pictures the blonde Knight for a second. Going crazy back then, she really was about to wipe out that gang and the factory herself. Of course, that would mean she'd become an international criminal for sure, so Kang-Joon held her back. There was no one who really got hurt so really, such a reaction was unnecessary.

"But that's not important. What's important is that I know that someone can do this on purpose and I've been through it myself once."

"So...are you saying The Crescent sent us faulty equipment on purpose? What if it was only that set?"

"Have you ever heard of Aether sword blowing up in use?"

“No...”

Quite a few hunters die in the battle because their devices malfunction. Yet, Miss Seol cannot seem to recall any cases of an Aether sword blowing up. Still, she cannot risk to experiment with the other two swords. Miss Seol stands up from her seat with a stern look.

“I’m going to talk to them.”

“They’ll just tell you it’s because the equipment is old.”

They’ll only have to say it blew up by a coincidence and they do not know anything about it. Looking closely at the other two swords, Kang-Joon comes to see one more thing. Made from the factory, devices usually come with some sort of a brand mark.

However, the devices that came as a gift have no marks whatsoever. It almost seems like an appeal that they did not produce the devices themselves.

Even if Kang-Joon and Seol try to bring it to the court, it is obvious that it would take ridiculous amount of time to prove that the ‘mistake’ was actually intentional. Miss Seol seems concerned.

“What do we do then?”

“I’ll go there myself.”

“Then do what?”

“Make a refund.”

Then, Kang-Joon grins.

“And maybe some exchange.”

Get hit by something, give back double. There is a lot of areas where law does not quite hold in the world of hunters and Kang-Joon has survived in such a world for a long time. He is quite familiar with making outlaw negotiations.

And, he certainly knows how to cut a deal that would cause him

no loss.

“mmm...hmmmm....”

Still, the Finance Manger Song would not wake up from his sleep. Kang-Joon then realises that he is yet to even exchange names with manger Song. At this point, he comes to think maybe such a day will never come.

The next day,

Miss Seol looks at Kang-Joon with a concerned face as she hands her car key over.

“No accidents. Alright?”

“What if I scratch it?”

“You will get punished.”

“Is that it?”

“You will get punished big time.”

“Scary...”

“It just pisses me off if you say that with such a calm face. Just get on your way already.”

“Yep.”

Despite the minor dispute, Kang-Joon is rather amazed at the foreign vehicle under the company name. As Seol once said, the company seems to have had better days regardless of current situation.

Kang-Joon is on his way to The Crescent by himself. The factory is located in Hanam, and Kang-Joon is equipped with his bracelet, sword and even the blaster. Although he probably won't have to pull them out, it is a good practice to be ready just in case.

Miss Seol kindly let Kang-Joon use the company car for his trip and mid-sized BMW sedan is comfortably taking Kang-Joon to the destination with a good engine sound.

Even though some hunting devices are made in the factory by machine, such devices all tend to be low quality. Devices over a certain level are handmade piece by piece, consequently making them expensive. Above all, different factories have different know-hows and secrets of their own. In the 20 years from the first appearance of the monsters, equipment factories have already established a solid industry.

Every hunter has different taste in equipment. Hence, the best way of making them is to customise everything from top to bottom for different hunters. Of course, low-Class hunters would simply purchase the factory made equipment as they do not have both the reputation and the money. Custom devices surely are ridiculously expensive.

The equipment factory ‘The Crescent’ is big enough to have the facility to produce ready-made equipment. At the same time, they also have a few skilled craftsmen under their care. They started out small and got themselves up to this point, now big enough to be labelled as a corporation. Equipment beyond a certain level are handmade by the craftsmen, with the rest made in the factory by machine.

“Not too far from the office.”

Kang-Joon finishes parking, pulling a box from the passenger seat.

Massive factories generally have no access for the public by policy so Kang-Joon heads to the main desk through the open door.

“Hello, how can I help you?”

“Ah, I’m Kang-Joon Choi from Hero Management.”

Kang-Joon answers to the kind welcome of the clerk. Hearing where Kang-Joon is from, the clerk considers him now as a customer, becoming even kinder towards him.

“I’d like to meet the CEO, would that be possible?”

“Ah, would you wait for a minute?”

The clerk makes a call to somewhere.

“Oh, Mr. Kim. Yep, Mr. Choi from Hero Management is waiting here right now....Oh, yes, yes. I understand.”

Right after the phone call, the clerk looks at Kang-Joon with an awkward smile.

“He seems to be pretty busy right now. You might have to wait a while...”

“How long would it be?”

“Oh, I can’t tell you exactly.”

Kang-Joon recognises the pattern. They would make him wait as long as possible then disappear once their business hours come to an end. When there is an uncomfortable guest, they simply will have to not see them. However, Kang-Joon already knew it would unfold like this. Smiling at the clerk, Kang-Joon opens his mouth.

“Ah, there was a bit of a problem with the weapons we got from The Crescent. Could you please tell them I will discuss with other factories about the devices if they don’t want to do anything about this situation?”

Discussing about the devices that were adjusted to explode with the other factories would result in an obvious outcome. It would severely damage the image of the factory, exposing all the troubles to the public as well. Kang-Joon knows for sure that they will come out and see him for this. The clerk, recognising the situation may be more serious than they thought, quickly makes a call again.

Chapter 13 - There Is A Reason For An Unconditional Favour (3)

Not too long after, Kang-Joon stands right before the president of the factory in his office. The president actually comes from a business background with no practical experience in crafting. He is the one who first started the full industrialisation of hunting devices in a more systematic manner by gathering a handful of craftsmen to start with. Strictly speaking, he is no expert in the devices themselves.

As if he is offended with the fact that he himself has to meet a rookie manager in person privately in his office, the frown on his face is rather vivid. Uncomfortably, he spits his words out.

“is Miss Seol well?”

“Oh, yea, she’s way too well. It’s almost like she’s getting even younger.”

“Wouldn’t it be good for her to get even younger.”

“Exactly.”

Kang-Joon and Jin-Soo, the president of The Crescent, after a few light words, jump straight into the real talk. Kang-Joon brings up the topic.

“All this stuff. You sent us this awhile ago, right?”

“Yes. But there’s something you need to know.”

Twisting the end of his lips, he points at the Aether sword which Kang-Joon had placed on the table.

“These are not the products of our factory.”

“Sorry?”

“These are just some products which have been sitting in the warehouse. We didn’t make these devices. They are old-generation

ones kept for research purposes. We just sent you the ones that we considered still usable. These things have been in so many different hands, now we don't even know who laid their hands on them. We just serviced them a little bit and sent them...I'm sorry to hear about the explosion but...did anyone get hurt?"

"Nope. Just some scratches on a few bricks."

"Good to hear. But, let's get this clear. These are not the products of The Crescent."

"Hmm...so you purposely sent products that are very possibly faulty?"

"Faulty? Our servicing is as secure and high-quality as our production. I don't know where the trouble came from but...didn't you use them too harshly maybe?"

Attitude to turn the fault on the user. Kang-Joon, tilting his head a little bit, asks back.

"It's made to be a weapon. Do you think it's even possible to handle them like a baby or something? It's meant to be treated harshly. Seems like you are saying the products made by The Crescent will all explode into pieces when used under an extreme condition. With an impact big enough to blow up ten people in a split second."

"...Aren't you stepping over the line a little bit? You think I'm an easy person to play with just because I'm personally meeting you like this? I told you. These are not our products."

To the president's words, Kang-Joon pulls out his hunter ID, plonking it onto the table. The ID clearly states that he is a B-Class hunter. Having been in the industry for a while, the president should well know what it means to be a B-Class pure human hunter.

Kang-Joon puts up a bright smile.

"You think I'm an easy person to play with?"

There is only one thing a B-Class hunter ID indicates. Jin-Soo predicted the big growth of monster related industries as soon as the monster breakouts started to happen. Hence, he is very familiar with this part of the world and has been through enough scenes to have met a lot of people. For sure, he can tell that the rookie manager standing right before his eyes is not an easy person to deal with.

‘This fucker...he’s a veteran.’

The Mutants, The Knights and even The Awakes of S-Class take their hats off to a B-Class pure human hunter. Skimming through the ID, Jin-Soo cannot find any traces of fabrication.

Because they tend to be more dependent on weapons and devices than anyone else, pure human hunters have better eyes when it comes to assessing the quality of them. Jin-Soo decides to switch up his attitude. Uncrossing his legs, he sits up straight on the couch.

“Ah...alright. I’m sorry that I looked down on you. Still, the responsibility for this problem really has to be clarified. I’m certain that our servicing was perfect. Maybe there was the problem with the transporting process. Are you sure the rest two will have the same issue?”

“Oh, really? So there is no problem at all, huh?”

As Kang-Joon asks, picking up an Aether sword from the table, Jin-Soo nods with a stiff face.

“Our craftsmen have the best skills in the world! More of this, I will consider it as an insult to the reputation of The Crescent. We will gladly re-service the products so I hope there is nothing to...”

Kang-Joon activates the Aether sword, putting it back onto the table. With a deadly weapon right before his eyes, Jin-Soo jumps up from the couch.

“Wh,wh...wh...what the hell are you doing?!”

“You said no problems. So there shouldn’t be any problems with leaving this thing on, right?”

“.....”

Looking at Kang-Joon who is keeping his cool, Jin-Soo is about to go crazy.

“I saw this thing exploding with my own eyes, yet you don’t want to believe it. So why don’t we see together? Whether it was because we used to too harshly...”

Kang-Joon lifts his head up towards Jin-Soo only to see his face turning almost green. Kang-Joon grins.

“Or if it will just blow up by itself. Oh, don’t worry too much about it. If you put on this Armour Coat, you should be protected enough from the explosion.”

Kang-Joon stands up from his seat, putting the Armour Coat sent from The Crescent around the president’s shoulders. Of course, the protection of the Armour Coat is bad enough to be broken down by a single kick.

“You were certain it will not explode, yea?”

“.....”

“Let’s see. If it’s going to blow up or not.”

“Th...this is crazy! It’s crazy to play with something that is possibly faulty like this!”

“Well, you said the servicing was perfect and there is no problem with it. Also, you said the product is not from The Crescent but...”

Jin-Soo cannot find any words to fight against Kang-Joon. Kang-Joon, grabbing the Aether Sword, shows him the bottom of the handle.

“Well, it’s clearly engraved in there. ‘The Crescent’...”

The mark is indeed the original and unique brand mark of The

Crescent and Jin-Soo knows that it is real for sure.

“Th, this can’t be real!”

Kang-Joon puts the sword back onto the table. As soon as it’s placed there, it starts to vibrate vigorously. Jin-Soo’s face goes dead. Kang-Joon pulls him back from reaching to the table.

“That will not be turned off until you admit that it has a full potential to explode.”

“Turn it off! Off! Off! Off right now! It’s going to blow up! Blow up! That will blow up for sure you crazy bastard!”

“What’s the matter? You are wearing your Armour Coat, I can activate my Armour Field. We will be safe from such an explosion, won’t we?”

“No! Not at all! This place will get blown to hell! Let go! Call the cops! Right now!”

Right at that moment, the vibration from the sword suddenly stops. Kang-Joon sees Jin-Soo’s face turning even more dead. Then, he cuts off the recording on his phone.

“Mr. President! Are you alright?!”

The worker who rushes into the room because of all the sound recognises there is a problem as he sees Kang-Joon and his boss awkwardly standing. The president can surely call the cops on Kang-Joon right now.

Yet, it is obvious that some dirty things will be revealed during the investigation. In many aspects, businessmen do not tend to be very fond of the police. With the things that will rise to the surface in the investigation, president himself is more likely to be arrested rather than Kang-Joon.

“Uhm, no. There’s no problem. It’s fine. Leave us for a while. Thank you.”

Obviously, the scene certainly looks problematic. But still, the

employee does a little bow and hurries out of the room.

Kang-Joon turns off the Aether sword then hands it over. Looking closely at the handle of the sword, Jin-Soo seems to be rather troubled.

“Thi,this is real....”

“You said it was made by some other company, but clearly it isn’t.”

Of course, the sword itself actually is a clean ready-made product of The Crescent which has nothing to do with the faulty ones Kang-Joon received, he had only got his hands on the sword yesterday and the vibration was from a vibrating part taken off of an alarm clock. Kang-Joon, though he may have a lot of guts, is still a logical person. He would not risk his life for this negotiation.

“So, I demand you to do something about this!”

Slamming on the table, he slides his hands under it to take the vibrating block back. Although it was only a bit louder than a normal phone vibration, the president still got fooled big time.

In fact, the three swords sent to Hero Management could not be identified of their manufacturer. By purposely getting rid of the brand mark, The Crescent attempted to avoid the responsibility.

Completely unaware of that the device he is holding actually has no problem at all, Jin-Soo is troubled by the fact that their own product showed serious signs of explosion. Regardless of the voice recording, if he fails at persuading Kang-Joon, The Crescent would have to go down for sure.

“...Yes. I admit that there was a mistake during the servicing process. I still cannot even believe that such a product is really made by us.”

Jin-Soo is a man with quick calculation. He quickly comes to admit the fact that he is driven into a corner. Yet, he goes on to clarify that it is all an unfortunate accident. However, Kang-Joon

does not stop there.

“Why did you do this?”

“Wh, what?”

“Why did you give us faulty stuff on purpose?”

“Y, you...What kind of a conspiracy are you speaking? Are you really saying that we gave you faulty products on purpose? You really must not be scared of all the possible charges you could face for saying such a thing!”

“The one who should face charges is you. You gave us a grenade with a pin unplugged as a weapon for us to trust.”

“Enough of that! If faulty products is your problem, we will replace them with brand new C-Class products. So get out! You keep speaking that gibberish, I will call the security on you!”

“I still don’t think you understand the situation. This is nothing short of homicide.”

As Kang-Joon fights back, Jin-Soo’s face tenses up even more. He can obviously tell there is a massive internal panic going on with Jin-Soo right now.

“Giving away faulty equipment to the hunters of Hero Management and letting them die from the accidents yet the products cannot be identified....Don’t you really think this is way too black hearted? No matter how hard I look at it, this is a trap set by you guys and you have established all the escape routes from this. But how pitiful...one of the swords just had to be...”

Kang-Joon snatches the sword from the president.

“From The Crescent.”

Kang-Joon grins. Jin-Soo avoids Kang-Joon’s stare. Though he may be smiling, Kang-Joon’s eyes are piercing into the president’s mind like a set of cold daggers.

“Your claim that it was intentional, that is a misunderstanding

for sure.”

The moment he admits to that claim, The Crescent will have to close with all the related persons arrested. Kang-Joon does not even want to know why they set up such a plot.

Instead, he is about to rip them off as much as he can.

“Armour Coats, Aether swords, all A-Class. Three sets.”

“Wh....at?”

“Also, C-Class Shield Bracelets, three of them. The warranty will have to come with all of them. With no doubt.”

“What?”

“If you can make that replacement, we’ll put this ‘accident’ behind us.”

That means that without the replacement, the situation will no longer be an unfortunate accident but a controversial case about intentional modification on the equipment. Jin-Soo is smart enough to understand what Kang-Joon is implying here.

“B,bullshit! Are you out of your mind?! Those products will add up to 800 grand at market price! Anything but the bracelets...”

“Well, if you really would like to see how fast Korean police and the prosecution can move...”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Threat? That’s a little harsh.”

Tapping on the sword of The Crescent, Kang-Joon continues.

“This is a negotiation.”

To risk the whole factory or to giveaway the best products of the company for free and put this situation behind.

Chapter 14 - Every Unconditional Favor Has A Reason- #4

He contemplated for a moment while grinding his teeth. Honestly, it wasn't worth contemplating over. If a lawsuit was filed, The Crescent would be at higher disadvantage than Hero Management.

'Shit, shit, shit... and it'll get worse if this event gets more complicated.'

Kang-Joon knew how to survive within the boundary of the law, and also knew that benefiting was much more important than resolving it. There was too much at stake for the opponent to confess their mistakes, so all Kang-Joon could do was try to benefit from a certain point. He wasn't sure if it was intentional, but he knew that Director Hyun won't ever tell the truth.

So, Kang-Joon decided to get as much as he could.

"Then...let's do that."

Due to the mistake that the director of The Crescent made before, they couldn't just stand by and watch their first-rate device be taken away. When it came to the fate of the battle, it was cheaper for them, but I couldn't help but feel bitter on the inside.

Kang-Joon entered The Crescent's safe and received the A rank Aether Sword, which was created by a group of master artisans, and an armor coat. On top of that, he handed over a C rank Shield Bracelet.

The Shield Bracelet was part of the first-rate hunting device and it was a mini armor coat. When it's used with an armor coat, it strengthens it like so that it can be used like a shield. Even though it was small, they had to include a lot of functions and despite of it being small and was a F rank Shield Bracelet, it was worth over 10 million won. (Approximately 10,000 dollars) The hunter's world

revolved around money and that's why there were so many things one had to spend money on.

After Kang-Joon left in a car, The Crescent's Director, Hyun Jin-Soo, stood in front of the window and watched Kang-Joon's car leave. The Crescent was large workshop that was part of the mid-sized companies and even though they believed they lost a lot to Kang-Joon, it wasn't enough for the company to go bankrupt.

"This is why I didn't want to do something dumb like this."

Hyun Jin-Soo lived somewhat of a righteous life, but he knew that intentionally sending a broken device was the same as murder. On top of that, he had to think about the possibility of this workshop having to take responsibilities, so he was feeling uneasy.

He made a call. After it rang a few times, he heard the voice of a middle-aged man.

"Oh, Director Hyun. I was just about to call you..."

"We have a problem, sir."

"A problem...what kind of problem? Oh, oh right...Was it Hero Management?"

"Yes."

"Didn't I give you instructions?"

"Yes, I did just as you have instructed me, but..."

That was something the Chairman requested the other day and Director Hyun was able to obtain the contract by fulfilling his request. That's why, it was a task that he had to fulfill no matter what.

"They've caught on."

"They have?"

"Yes. Some manager came and made a mess."

"A manager? Are you saying a manager came instead of Seol-

Young?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, wow...one manager went to that workshop and destroyed that place?”

“You see...that guy was...how to describe him. He was strange.”

“Strange?”

“He was a hunter. A B rank on top of that.”

“A hunter? A hunter is now a manager? What are you saying?”

“I’m not entirely sure...He really had a hunter license.”

“...Okay. A B rank hunter...It sounds vaguely familiar.”

The Chairman asked if there were any huge losses and when Director Hyun listed all the items that Kang-Joon took, the Chairman said he would compensate for the loss and hung up. After Director Hyun threw his phone on the sofa, he sat down.

“Bastard...I shouldn’t have gotten involved.”

Pushing his guilt aside, he hated himself for being so focused on getting that huge contract, causing him to make this kind of deal. But, without that contract, he wouldn’t be able to maintain the large workshop, so the deal wasn’t very useful to him.

Director Hyun hoped that it would end here.

He would be satisfied if the innocent, human hunter had exhausted. Including the awakened ones, the ones with special powers were rare when the disappearances first started and within 10 years, the number of human hunters increased. Now, there were so many knights, awakened ones and mutants that no one bothered with human hunters.

“Now that I think about it, I think that guy has over 10 years of experience.”

Since he looked at his license, he was able to assume Kang-Joon’s

experience. Whether it was humans or monsters, if he managed to survive in a world filled with monsters for 10 years (11 years to be exact), then it meant he was an intimidating monster as well.

Among the human hunters, they either die before becoming a C rank or after they become a C rank. If he was a B rank, then it's safe to say that he was one of the top hunters.

Director Hyun was curious as to why a guy like him suddenly became a manager at a management company instead of remaining as a hunter.

Hero Management was large a large management company in the past, but now, it was a company that was slowly being forgotten. But, a monster-like guy who used to be a hunter entered. He was an odd one because, unlike the other new recruit, there wasn't an awkward atmosphere around him.

He had a certain calmness that couldn't be seen in others. Because he calmly showed that he had the upper hand, Director Hyun fell for it.

'Whatever happens, it seems like Hero Management will cause a big commotion.'

Hoping that he won't get involved any longer, Director Hyun resumed his work.

Seol-Young couldn't keep her mouth closed after seeing the amazing hunting device that was worth 800 million won. Kang-Joon already inspected its quality so these new devices weren't faulty.

"No, no way..."

Instead of finding out how the situation ended, he received these items.

If he really tried to get information out of them in the first place, they probably would've kept their mouth shut. Seol-Young nodded her head after he explained that he'd rather gain something from it

rather than handing it over to the police.

At the same time, she felt shameful. She was obviously happy about getting a device for free, but doubt Kang-Joon and that doubt was right. Because of her mistake, a new hunter could've experienced an unnatural death during their first hunt.

Seol-Young was happy, but sad so she started mumbling.

"Thank you...very much, Kang Joon."

He almost lost his life and thanks to his plan, he was able to bring some really nice equipment. With these three sets, even a civilian that didn't know anything could wear them and take down a high-ranked monster.

"You're really, really amazing. I was surprised...so surprised..."

Not being able to hold it in, Seol-Young cried.

"Why are you crying during a happy time like this?"

"Oh, I'm no-not sure...I'm really grateful...that's why..."

It's been less than a month since Kang-Joon joined the almost bankrupt management. But, they already got a new hunter and new equipment. A hunter is supposed to make their own gear, but when training a new hunter, there are times when the management holds the device.

While seeing Seol-Young sniffle and wipe her tears with a handkerchief, Kang-Joon mumbled.

"They say you cry more when you get older..."

"...You jerk."

Smack!

"Ah! Wh-why did you hit me?!"

"You said it so that you can get hit!"

Maybe Seol-Young was angry, but she stopped crying and kicked Kang-Joon with her heel. Tears formed in Kang-Joon's eyes and he

hurriedly ran away. Wiping the tears from her eyes, Seol-Young watched Kang-Joon run away and grinded her teeth.

“This should be stored in the Hunter Bank.”

Since it was such an expensive item, keeping it at the office would be a crazy thing to do.

“Do you want to get something good to eat since we’re already out?”

Seol-Young shook the car key that was returned. Kang-Joon nodded with a smile. Manager Song of the financial team was still asleep, so there was no need to wake him up. As they headed towards the parking lot, Seol-Young quietly talked.

“It’s such a relief that you’re here, Kang-Joon.”

If someone died because of her mistake, she wouldn’t be able to live with it. Kang-Joon lightly nodded his head and asked with a serious expression.

“Seol-Young.”

“Yes?”

“Do you have some sort of grudge?”

“Grudge?”

Seol-Young quietly let out an empty laugh.

“I’m not sure about the hunters, but when you start working in the hunting management field...”

With a sad expression, she turned her attention to the ground.

“You hold grudges so many times during the day.”

After hearing her answer, Kang-Joon scratched his head. If he asked more questions, that would be provoking whatever she held inside. It was the same thing as her refusing.

“Well, there’s only one hunter now, so it shouldn’t happen, right?”

Seol-Young forcefully put on a bright smile.

Chapter 15 - Red Ocean and Blue Ocean are Two Chapters of a Book (1)

Weekend, morning.

Kang-Joon didn't have any close friends, nor family. Recently the only times his phone rang were caused by mobile games, which he mistakenly downloaded, sending him promotional messages like "log-in now to collect 20 Ruby", Seol Yeong was the only person who sent him messages.

[The company car will be used by Mr. Kang-Joon in the future. The key is at your desk so take it later. There is nothing to worry about about insurance, Team Leader Song will handle all of it.]

After scouting the Magical Girl and extorting devices worth 800 million won (~800,000USD) Seol Yeong's trust in Kang-Joon shot up to the sky. That was the reason he suddenly had an imported car. Kang-Joon enjoyed the corporate lifestyle quite a bit. The low number of people meant that there was almost no hierarchy, and he enjoyed the part where he could act like half-friends with the president.

'Should I raise Hero Management instead?'

After he talked about creating a company with Seol Yeong, he realized that it was quite a troublesome task. How many documents one needs to prepare; what insurance to choose; how many administrative matter one had to know. Kang-Joon realized creating a company wasn't as easy as he thought.

And also, he found out that the administration of most of that sort of administrative work was handled by team leader Song who just slept everyday.

Most of all, Kang-Joon was currently in a dilemma. If he developed Hero Management itself and later, when he established his own, all of his efforts until then would go down the drain. He

would be back to square one.

Working at a company to get to know the industry, and ending up helping it was rather nonsensical. But Kang-Joon was always a hardworking person like that. Doing sincerely what work he must, and doing whatever was necessary in the immediate moment.

Be it developing Hero Management and taking over it later, stealing it's manpower, or starting a new management from scratch, all of that belonged to the future. As always, no one knew Choi Kang-Joon genuine aim.

In many ways, Kang-Joon's start-up is still far away in the future, and for now he should first focus on his work developing Hero Management sincerely. They still didn't possess a proper hunter team yet, and he must get to know how they are faring in other areas than hunting.

-Ziiin!

His cell phone rang as he received a message. This time too the sender was Seol Yeong.

[Mr. Kang-Joon, we should now create our proper hunting team, right? Monday two weeks from now will be the completion ceremony of the Korean Branch of the Temple. It would be good if we could rope-in a Knight there. We have a total of 3 sets of equipment. If we can at least get 2 more persons we should be able to run our first hunting team.]

[Oh, that sounds good.]

[In that case you and I will have to go to YangPyeong on monday so I called to let you know.]

[Okay.]

[Then go rest. Sorry for contacting you on your day off.]

And with that the call came to an end. Kang-Joon fell into his thoughts.

Every year new Knights would graduate from the Knight Temple and join the Hunter circle in droves. The Knight Temple itself was an organization funded entirely by the UN, which had grown in scale ever since the Great Disappearance. They looked for people who had talent to become a Knight, and trained them.

After finishing it, the graduates can become Templars under UN or choose to become a Knight. Templars are those without worldly desires who wander the world's dangerous areas for the sole objective of protecting others, and Knights had many choices, such as deciding to sign a contract with a management company, or becoming a freelancer.

Naturally, there were many people who choose to become a Knight over a Templar. However, there were still many that chose to become Templars as a result of Knight Education or body modification process.

And the graduation ceremony was where they will evaluate the level of the graduates and also the moment each and every one of them will decide which way they would go.

And, that graduation ceremony is precisely monday after next week. Obviously, Knights taking their first steps preferred affiliating themselves to a management rather than hunting alone, being taken care of until they were able to throw out their newbie badge, while managements always required new Hunters so each party needed the other.

Kang-Joon had no knowledge of that system, and Seol Yeong had enthusiastically told him about it.

‘I now know something I didn’t before.’

Kang-Joon had experienced attending a completion ceremony in the past, the memories he had of it was of observing a sacred ceremony. However, it had now become a place where management scouter were everywhere.

Next week would be period management and Knights meet each other, which would be one week earlier than the graduation ceremony where they decide which path they will walk in the future.

A hunting team required a minimum of 3 members. Of course, Awaken and Mutants possess their own diverse abilities and as such have their own appropriate battle formations. But, the most important pieces were the Knights. Knights were fundamentally more efficient than most other units. They were indispensable since their strong bodies could defend attacks or easily fend them off, which in turn, allowed for more stable formations.

Therefore, a good Knight was considered indispensable in a hunter team.

Even though Kang-Joon didn't have a bad eye for Knights, he knew an expert in the area. He called somewhere with his cellphone. And, after beeping for a moment, somebody answered.

[Hey. It is been a long while Kang-Joon.]

“Hey. What are you doing?”

[I just received a massage moments ago. I am in a hotel.]

“Where are you?”

[Rio.]

“Busy?”

“No, I intend to relax since i did one big one last time. Why?”

“I need to get a Knight, and I need to borrow your eyes.”

[... you want to use a major manpower like me on merely checking some baby chicks?]

“That is just an excuse, it is being a long time since we saw each other.”

[In that case you should come to me. Why do I have to go to you?]

“As you can see, I am an office worker, and you are a freelancer right? Help me just this once.”

[Shut up, you don't even come to the Union nowadays, and you are looking for friendship? Also I am not a freelancer now. I found myself a management.]

“Union... I'm not sure right now.”

[Oh, I don't know. I have been bored these days.. Anyway, if I go when should I leave?”

“The sooner the better. Will the management not care?”

[At my level, that doesn't matter. Just buy me something delicious.”

“I shall provide the best of the best services, Ma'am.”

[F*ck you.]

Kang-Joon hung up his phone, the phone had [Maria] written on it. Thinking about Maria's real name for a moment Kang-Joon chuckled alone.

And that night,

“Hey.”

Kang-Joon met a blonde woman wearing sunglasses, tight jeans and a white T-shirt at Sillim Station. Kang-Joon gazed at her speechless.

“... How come you already arrived?”

“Why? You told me to. That's why I'm here early. Uh, why are there so many people around?”

All the passers-by took sidelong glances at the tall and attractive Maria. Maria had a good style, and even though all she had on was single pair of uni-color sneakers and a single pair of sunglasses, it all suited her. Maria's luggage consisted only of a metallic carrier. Kang-Joon was speechless and asked.

“No, No... That... How did you arrive so soon like this?”

“This noona has a private plane.”

“Private plane?”

“Yeah, the management gave it to me. So I immediately took the ride over.”

“That’s crazy.”

Kang-Joon was entirely incapable of speaking after that words. He heard she found a management, but he couldn’t imagine that the management would give out a private plane for a single person.

Maria was affiliated to Christlene, an international super-management. That management was so excessively big that it supervised some dangerous countries as UN proxy.

Maria was a manpower that was sent to events equal to or above S-rank. As such, even the that private plane possessed the finest airframe and latest core engine. That is to say, it could be used on leisure trips but also on hired missions.

Kang-Joon looked at Maria, and wondered if this was still the same person that, like him, rolled around on the floor, covered in dirt just a few years ago.

“Suddenly I get this feeling you and I are so far apart.”

“If we look only at your skill we aren’t that far apart, though?”

“Image is everything in this world.”

S-ranks Knights were a very strong workforce, and moreover Maria was special even among S-rank Knights. As such Maria was eligible to receive special treatment. High rank Hunters received a huge contract deposit simply by entering a management, and were able to live a luxurious life without even using a penny of their own, just like Maria was right now.

But to think she would receive such treatment immediately after joining that international management company...

It would be a lie to say Kang-Joon didn't think about winning over Maria, but that thoughts quickly collapsed, not to mention buying a private plane right now, it a wonder whether Hero Management could afford her a car.

“Let's see what kind of party Choi Kang-Joon has prepared for me, shall we?”

Kang-Joon couldn't possibly say to the excited Maria that he only had ramen on his house. Once Kang-Joon brought her to his studio, Maria frowned as soon as she came inside his room.

“Kang-Joon. What is this?”

“What?”

“What sort of extreme hobby do you have?”

“Why?”

“Why are you obstinate in living in this sort of place?”

“What do you mean a place like this?”

“No, you know you have a lot of money. More than I do... Why are you living in a studio?”

Maria's doubt was valid. There were many Hunters who earned a lot through a single hunt, and Kang-Joon too had quite a lot of money. As such she couldn't understand Kang-Joon living in a studio like this. Maria sighed seeing Kang-Joon wouldn't reply.

“Haa, forget that. Since there is no changing it does that mean you and I are going to sleep here together tonight?”

Maria said as though she gave up.

“You... Lived in Korea for 1 year and then turned in a perfect player...”

“5678.”

“Uh?”

But Kang-Joon muttered something, and hearing the words

Maria tilted her head.

“5678.”

“What is that?”

“The password from the house in-front.”

“That... Why?”

Kang-Joon took out a blanket from the wardrobe and suddenly threw it at Maria.

“Here, it is the front room.”

“Eh, Eh?”

“This is an office building.”

Maria didn't free herself from the stupor caused by those words for a while. She only stared at Kang-Joon blankly while hugging her blanket.

The studio in Sillim-Dong.

This four-storey building only had Kang-Joon living inside.

Chapter 16 - Red Ocean and Blue Ocean are Two Chapters of a Book (2)

Kang-Joon wasn't fond of open spaces, he usually passed most of his time on the room number 1 on the first floor. This single-room apartment building had a basement floor as well.

He requested all items stored in the International Hunter's Bank to be delivered to Korea, and those were now being stored in a safe inside the remodeled area Kang-Joon created on his room on the first floor basement. The opposite wall was completely removed to create a fairly large underground training area. Although it was an illegal construction, there was no risk of collapse as the building he choose had a robust foundation without any big structural problems. He consulted the blueprints and also searched for advice from specialists a few times to guarantee the safety.

As he was meticulous about security as well, a security door was installed directly on the entrance to the staircase going down the 1st floor basement itself. Nothing would be stolen unless somebody forcefully demolished the whole wall.

"You... What kind of war do you plan to start?"

"I just wanted to try doing something like this since it is the first time I had a house."

Maria's jaws agaped seeing Kang-Joon's studio which was practically a shelter. Buying the building itself wouldn't be hard for her, but making a clean construction like this would. Hidden among the ordinary studio buildings, Kang-Joon's building housed unused ether devices of the highest grade enough to arm a whole company of Hunters.

Selling any of those items could buy a site with a building like the one they are currently living in. Maria realized that Kang-Joon aim was definitely not money at the moment.

If his aim was money, Kang-Joon already had it and only by selling these devices he could get enough to live extravagantly for his entire life. But Kang-Joon never spoke of the most important things, therefore Maria pursed her lips knowing full well she wouldn't receive any reply.

The top floor of the building consisted of only one house which took the whole floor, originally that was the place where the landlord and his family lived. Kang-Joon cooked for Maria there.

“Why don't you live here and live in that box instead?”

“It is too big for my taste, it only felt uncomfortable.”

The reason Kang-Joon lived on the first floor is because living in that big apartment for a few days without any company made him feel lonely.

“You still make great food.”

“It's not like it'll go anywhere.”

Since he was very young Kang-Joon followed a Hunter team starting as an errand boy doing all sort of miscellaneous task all by himself. Naturally, as the youngest among the party, he was also in charge of cooking, and now, after doing it for hours without end, Kang-Joon cooking skill was of quite high level.

The Dish Kang-Joon made was soybean paste stew, Maria ate it well without showing any changes in her expression.

“I want to give cooking a try too.”

“Go Ahead.”

“When I do it, it's either salty or bland.”

“If it is bland add more salt, and if it is salty you simply add more water.”

“If I add more salt, it becomes salty, and if I add water, it becomes bland.”

“...You are destined to eat out for the rest of your life.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

The two finished their meal amidst boring conversation. Maria came down to the room in-front while Kang-Joon slept in that same room.

Monday,

They met not at the company, but at a café near Yangjae station.

[I have a Knight I know, so I am bringing her since she told me that she can help.]

[That sounds good.]

As he had told her he would be bringing one Knight beforehand Seol Yeong wasn’t really flustered. Seol Yeong only eyed the tall and attractive Maria and then greeted her with little spirit as if frightened.

“H-Hello... I am Hero Management’s president Seol Yeong.

“I’m Maria. Nice to meet you.”

Maria extended out her hand while replying with a somehow dry voice, and the two shared a handshake. Then she stared at Kang-Joon for a little while with a strange gaze. However, Seol Yeong was surprised in a different way.

“I-If I am not mistaken... Did you say Ms. Maria?”

“Yes, that’s so.”

“No Way! You wouldn’t be that ‘Maria’, right?”

“Well... It is shameful but... Yes, that’s right.”

“Paladin Maria!”

Seol Yeong jumped up startled. Maria scratched her head with an embarrassed expression as if that reaction was unfamiliar for her.

Seol Yeong seized Maria's hand while her eyes shined like stars.

"T-That! It's a big honor! To have the luck of seeing a Paladin directly! Oh, wow... What should I do. M-My Heart looks like it will explode... Mr. K-Kang-Joon?"

"Yes?"

With Kang-Joon reply Seol Yeong looked alternatively between him and Maria with a foolish expression. Maria was actually addressed as one of the 5 Paladins, rather embarrassingly, by the masses, yet Kang-Joon called that Maria like one would call a neighborhood friend.

She gazed at Kang-Joon as if he suddenly became a stranger. Certainly, Kang-Joon seemed very knowledgeable concerning the Hunter industry, and most of his advice were those that others didn't know about. Maria didn't know what to do as this kind of atmosphere was awkward for her in the first place.

"H-Hey, calm down... I am not going anywhere."

"Ah, I am sorry. I was so surprised..."

"Should we get moving first?"

Actually Maria was quite a big celebrity, because of her distinguished appearance she was ranked first in the advertisement industry. In fact, having appeared in many advertisements aired abroad there were many who recognized her.

"I-I use that lotion."

"Ah, yes..."

Seol Yeong kept chattering about her use of the foreign lotion brand Maria advertised for, while Maria broke out in cold sweat. In many aspects, S-rank Knights were people equivalent to gods for these working in the industry. In the end, image was the most important, and no matter how similar a B-rank Hunter and an S-rank Knight were in terms of fighting ability, the two sounded

completely different.

In any case, the three boarded the car and departed.

Fundamentally, there was a time called the probing period before the graduation ceremony of the Knight Temple, which was like a holiday for the knights, while the people from various management companies checked out which knights to scout into their company. It was for that sort of reason that Seol Yeong departed earlier than the graduation Ceremony.

Kang-Joon glanced at Maria, who was seated in the back seat, through the back mirror and asked.

“How about the Knight Temple? Do you know anything?”

“Let me see, it’s being over a decade since I graduated so many things should have changed. Also, at my graduation ceremony managements didn’t come like this.”

“That’s true.”

The graduation ceremony was a completion ceremony and nothing else, it didn’t have any special meaning. It only deformed to its current state with the massive increase of management companies. Seol Yeong, sitting in the passenger seat, slowly explained. In many ways, as someone who managed a management properly she had a great knowledge of such matters.

“When we go to the Temple the first thing they give out is a big book. That big book records the capabilities and evaluations of the Knight candidates.”

“Isn’t that invasion of privacy?”

“First, a management that intends to recruit someone has to donate 10 million won (~10,000 USD) per person to the Temple.”

Even though Seol Yeong seemed to be explaining something completely different, Kang-Joon understood enough from what he heard. There was money involved so even if there was an element

of infringement it was publicly disclosed. Wherever you go, money stood higher compared to many other values. Maria giggled with her arms and legs crossed.

“The money that goes into nurturing a Knight is much more than that.”

Absorbing cubes, body modification, dealing with meal and lodgings, as well as the cost of education, if you combine all of those the cost of raising a single Knight could easily reach over 30~40 million won (~30k~40k USD). Therefore, UN's raison d'être, fighting for world peace, was all but gone, and they were greedy to raise money through the Templars.

As such earning money to maintain the Temple was UN top-priority at the moment. Of course, it wasn't as if there were no private Knight Academies. There were only two choices: Pay the Academy and receive Knight education as well as body-modification or receive it all free of charge by affiliating oneself with the Academy and hunting for it during a set period of time.

In many ways, UN's Knight Temple graduates were not restricted in any way and, as such, the place became every Knight aspirant's dream. But only those with admirable talent were admitted.

“The key categories checked were: Body Reinforcement, Weapon Proficiency, Teamwork, Willpower, Potential, and Stability.”

Kang-Joon only knew about the fighting and on-the-scene mechanisms, and he had no knowledge in dealing with these sort of administrative matters. But he could roughly guess what those meant. The higher the average of those scores the better ranked a person would be.

“‘Stability’... I don't like that word, it's not like we are machines or something.”

Maria clicked her tongue hearing those words. Seol Yeong felt guilty as she thought that Maria said that to her.

“Actually you know some unstable kids die by cardiosclerosis.”

“I know that, but... Sheesh.”

Knights strengthened bodies was a simple ability of making their bodies harder using the power of the cubes. It can also deactivated and activated freely. However, people with immature control of their body strengthening ended up inadvertently hardening some body areas they shouldn't while in the middle of the strengthening causing their own body disability, and die without being able to undo those actions. This mostly happened in beginner Knights.

“Did they already have this ranking system when Ms. Maria finished the Temple course?”

“It did. Competition is always a good way to bring out useless effort.”

Hearing Maria's downcast words Seol Yeong broke out in cold sweat. There was just one thing she wanted to ask about, and Kang-Joon chuckled.

“That girl, she was the last.”

“...what?”

“Hey, why are you saying that sort...”

“But isn't she an S-Rank now? For a last place in the temple graduation to do that... Is that even possible?”

“I was forced in failing. I had a quarrel with the Temple director.”

“You, why are you bringing up something from such a long time ago?”

Maria used to cause conflicts with the instructors and senior Templars for every little thing in the Temple, eventually she created a big scene quarreling with the director. However, her capability was too outstanding and they couldn't prevent her from graduating, as such she received the lowest marks and was sent

out. Maria pouted and in the end Kang-Joon laughed as if finding the whole thing funny.

“You, I still find it weird you didn’t go to jail when I think of how you smashed the podium in the graduation.”

Kang-Joon remembered the scene clearly as he attended Maria’s graduation ceremony. Maria let out a ‘Pfft’ when she thought of that time.

“That’s all in the old days...”

Long gone were the days Kang-Joon and Maria were newbies, but she was a promising candidate for Templar. Had she become a Knight and received UN’s wholehearted support she would probably have become an SS-rank Knight by now.

In any case, Maria was one of the best Knights candidates at that time. So, naturally, Seol Yeong looked at Kang-Joon.

“What about you, Mr. Kang Joon?”

“Me?”

“Yes, even though it disappeared now, you should know that there was a Hunter Academy in the past.”

An educational institution that trains pure human hunters, there was no Hunter Academy now. Now pure Hunters had declined in number, and were it not for those who loathe monsters becoming newly registrants the majority would not even try.

“I was ranked at the far end.”

“Did Mr. Kang-Joon also not get along with the teachers?”

“No, I was purely ranked among the last.”

A Mutant, Awaken, or Knight, Kang-Joon didn’t correspond to any of those three. Therefore he chose to be a pure human Hunter, and, as such, Kang-Joon wasn’t able to stand out at the Academy. Seol Yeong, looking at Kang-Joon expression, didn’t inquire more.

Maria, looking at Kang-Joon face reflected through the rear view mirror, released a bitter smile.

“This guy should be the only one who was active until recently. After all, the ones who survived are the ones who did well.”

“The rest... people, then...”

“The rest are probably frying chicken somewhere. In the first place, this is a field where people chicken out after a few tries. It’s normal for people to flee after their first time.”

“Ha, ha... It is really like that.”

Seol Yeong nodded her head. Maria then looked at Kang-Joon and winked her right eye. Seeing that, Kang-Joon smiled. Maria even went and lied, which was something she wasn’t used to doing

Kang-Joon’s colleagues all died 11 years ago.

The car crossed the road outside Seoul and was heading to Yangpyeong.

“Oh yeah, you seem to be good at Korean, Ms. Maria.”

“Oh... uh, yeah, I guess I am.”

Seol Yeong exclaimed at Maria’s fluent Korean skills. Be it pronunciation or vocabulary, she had no problems at all. However Kang-Joon tilted his head and told Seol Yeong,

“This girl is Korean.”

“What?”

“As a Korean person it is natural she speaks Korean well.”

“Hey, I have an international citizenship, you know?”

Hunters possessing only a hunter certificate, in other words a Hunter ID, were able to enter and exit most countries, and, in most cases, if they were of B-rank or higher they would be able to get entry in an almost any country without a Visa.

“Her name is Maria...”

“That is an Alias. She has another personal real name.”

“What? Is Ms. Maria really Korean?”

“You! You! Shut up! Shut up!!”

Thanks to her western outside appearance Maria was always misunderstood as a foreigner. In addition, she dyed her hair blonde so almost nobody viewed her as a Korean.

Seol Yeong then finally found some eastern facial features in Maria’s western-style appearance.

“Oh, in that case does she possess a Korean name too?”

Maria glared at the back of Kang-Joon’s head with eyes aflame. But Kang-Joon was still incapable of understanding the situation and continued grinning.

“That is indeed the case. That girl’s real name...”

“Hey, Kang-Joon.”

“Yes?”

Maria displayed Kang-Joon, who was in the middle of driving, a 100 won coin held between her index and thumb fingers. Kang-Joon suddenly felt the air turn cold while at the same time he felt a chill in his spine.

-Squish!

And as soon as she pressed the coin once it dented in half, and with a little more force – snap! – the coin separated in two. All of that only by pressing the index and thumb fingers together. Maria whispered in the ear of the driving Kang-Joon with a savage voice,

“Do you want to be folded like this?”

“Well, sorry.”

“If you are sorry shouldn’t you not do things you should apologize for?”

“No, that is not it. I am apologizing in advance for the deeds I will

do in the future.”

Kang-Joon laughed with a ‘pfft’ and said to Seol Yeong,

“Her real name is Kim Eul-Soon.”

“Whaaat?”

“Y-You! You! You jerk!”

Even though Maria jumped around with a reddened face, Kang-Joon was in the middle of driving and she couldn’t touch him carelessly.

“As you know that girl had a lot of disputes.”

“Yes...”

“That was because whenever someone called her by her real name in attendance she would flare up and fight.”

Maria (real name Kim Eul-Soon, 28) possessed a complex about her real name, so she called herself Maria since quite some time ago. The reason she fought with the Knight Temple instructors was because she wanted to be called by Maria during attendance and not her real name, the reason was simply because she was frequently called Kim Eul-Soon.

“You, Youuu... Stop it! You are dead for real!

Maria gritted her teeth and almost looked about to cry. The only one that teased her with her real name was Kang-Joon now.

Chapter 17 - Red Ocean and Blue Ocean are Two Chapters of a Book (3)

In the end, Kang-Joon's cheeky behaviour was rewarded with a fierce kick in the shin upon arriving at the Knight Temple. And, because of that, Kang-Joon collapsed half-crouching on the floor for about a minute.

“You... Is it right to beat people ignorantly like this?”

“Those who doesn't respect others should, naturally, receive punishment.”

Had she kicked with her all it would have being enough to smash an electric pole to pieces, so it was clear she was looking after him at the time. Seol Yeong thought of how the world knew Paladin Maria and also thought of her hot-tempered personality, unlike her cold image she unexpectedly got to know she possessed a fiery personality.

‘Although I don't know if that is only in front of Mr. Kang-Joon.’

Despite what it looks at first glance the two were very close.

The Knight Temple was located at Yangpyeong city Yangpyeong town's Yangkyon village. Even though the location's modern name disharmony was severe that was indeed the place. The Temple had purchased the place where the church was originally located, expanded it, and created a temple of huge scale at the site. Here there was dorms, educational buildings, gymnasium, including the most advanced strengthening buildings, and, because of the huge upheaval caused by management companies, it was preparing to expand the parking lot in the future.

Seven years ago, thanks to Knight Temple, Yangpyeong was promoted from county to city and developed to a degree incomparable to its past-self. Considered as the Knight's hometown, Yangpyeong city is now of big enough size to not be

inferior to any small or medium-sized city.

As such, the Knight Temple held an important place in Korea.

“There is so many people.”

Due to the completion ceremony, the parking lot was densely packed with cars of family members and of management personnel.

“It’s natural that a lot of families came.”

Commented Maria. While in the Knight Temple one had to live inside an enclosed space with a fixed diet, scheduled training, and strict education. Naturally going out and visits were rarely approved. The Temple’s training period was 2 years, and during that 2 years, although not completely isolated from the world, those inside lived with a fairly restricted freedom.

Excluding pure Hunters, although Knights, Awakens, and Mutants could be said to be mostly the same, a Knight most important strength was being able to dominate one’s mind before anything else. If the will is shaken their reinforced bodies will lose its hardness, and if those standing at the frontline collapse the whole group will be in danger.

That is why in addition to the different curriculum the Knight Temple also taught how to manage one’s mind. Therefore, almost all contact with the outside was blocked to emphasize the conditions to attain a perfect ‘crystal clear and calm as water’ mindset.

“Shall we go?”

Seol Yeong was in front, Maria and Kang-Joon followed. Maria’s eyes darted left and right with concern while she covered herself with the sunglasses and hat. Kang-Joon watched Maria with a grin.

“You look just like a celebrity right now.”

“Hunter or celebrity, these days the two are about the same.”

They were interlinked through publicity, there was even Hunters who appeared regularly on talent shows. After all, most Hunters didn't have a sense of duty or anything of the sort, anything was acceptable if they could make money without risking their lives. Just like the athletes of the past were titled celebrities, Hunters were also considered celebrities and their continuous emergence was a trend.

“Hey, if it is not president Seol. Still beautiful as always!”

Just before they entered the Temple entrance, a man dressed in suit approached and faced Seol Yeong. Seol Yeong outfit was a skinny jeans and sneakers, while Kang-Joon and Maria were dressed comfortably. They would be staying here for a few days so they had brought a lot of clothes to change into.

“Hello Mr. Choi Team Leader, I have not seen you in a long time.”

Despite being the oldest in the group Seol Yeong actually seemed the youngest, she looked just like a female college student going out for a stroll. Seol Yeong bowed her head politely. Then she gestured to Kang-Joon.

“Mr. Kang-Joon, this is Blue Order agency's team leader Choi Jeong-Wun. In the past he was in charge of Hero Management's third Hunter team.”

That meant he experienced working below Seol Yeong in the past. Whether the leaving process was unpleasant or not, it seemed there was no cracks in Seol Yeong and Choi Jeong-Wun relationship. Kang-Joon extended out his hand and leaned his head slightly.

“Hello. I am Choi Kang-Joon, currently learning about management on Hero Management.”

“Ah, nice to meet you. President Seol is an outstanding person so I am sure you will learn many things.”

“Haha... I am already learning.”

“How is he progressing, Ms. President? I suppose he isn’t being modest?”

“No. Our new employee is very hard-working.”

Seol Yeong spoke of how great her new employer, Choi Kang-Joon, was in front of team leader Choi and showered him with enough praises to make Kang-Joon embarrassed. Of course, she didn’t speak of how they handled any detailed issue but, as Seol Yeong spoke, she gazed at Kang-Joon with a special glimmer in her eyes.

“Oh, this is really good to see. I don’t know if we will be able to meet later and continue catching up. If that happens I would like to make you a little request.”

“I will certainly listen.”

As they were exchanging small talk Choi Jeong-Wun cellphone rang. Checking the message Choi Jeong-Wun facial expression became stiff for a short moment.

“Ah, yes. It seems I will have to go now. It was nice to see you after so long, Ms. President.”

“No. It was my pleasure.”

“In that case I am going, good luck.”

Before leaving Choi Jeong-Wun whispered to Seol Yeong with a small whisper. Although he deliberately spoke in a low voice it was enough for Kang-Joon and Maria to hear.

“I think Cloud and Lescian are going to sweep all Knights this year. These guys have come with many big shots in their hands. There is already many small management companies withdrawing. All of them are currently despairing for being assigned to this city.”

“Oh, oh... Yes. So it’s like that.”

“It’s probable we are the only ones willing to give it a try now...”

He showed a bitter smile knowing Hero Management’s circumstances.

“If possible, I hope you get a good result.”

“Ah, Yes. I also wish team leader Choi good results.”

“I will contact you later!”

Choi Jeong-Wun excused himself with a nod and ran hurriedly somewhere. Even with this brief glance it was possible to see he was a person with overflowing passion. His impression too was that of a gentle person, being very polite with Seol Yeong. Kang-Joon received a quite good impression of him. Even though he seemed a little simple-minded, those without tact originally were not bad people.

As they entered the Knight Temple Seol Yeong was greeted by many people, all of them shared brief, and sometimes long, conversations. Maria walked a little further behind, while Kang-Joon shared greetings with these people one by one.

All these people looked at Seol Yeong happily, sincerity could be felt in their gazes. Kang-Joon once again realized that he did not know much about Seol Yeong.

‘She is the popular type.’

Seeing her meeting everyone’s eyes, greeting, chatting, and her cheerful figure Seol Yeong was definitely a business person and someone with a fresh personality. Regardless of what any Hero Management’s officials told him it was impossible to explain this.

Despite Seol Yeong being all by herself she still greeted everyone faithfully.

Being such there was no reason for people to dislike her. A pretty face, kind, respectful with those below her, and a likeable reaction. In truth there was no unpleasant part.

“Aren’t your second daughter turning 5 now? She is so pretty! Isn’t that the time when they are the cutest? Haa, and you are so busy with work matters... How unfortunate.”

“I heard your esteemed son successfully passed the entrance exam. Unfortunately I had nothing to send but a red ginseng.”

“The dried corvina you sent me last festival was delicious. Thank you. Ah, these days Uijeongbu direction’s seems critical, isn’t that direction the place where...”

Seol Yeong had to remember many people at once, fully remembering their names, jobs, and family details. Certainly, that sort of crazy memory could only be seen on those possessing a businessman mind. And that was not the end.

“Mr. Kang-Joon, this is Rosewald’s finance team...”

“Mr. Kang-Joon, this is Lescian Management’s 5th Team Leader...”

“Mr. Kang-Joon, This is Dolleus’s... Oh, you changed jobs? Oh... so it is like that, where are you now... Oh, yes, Karam? Wow, congratulations!”

“Mr. Kang-Joon this is...”

Seol Yeong made sure to introduce Kang-Joon to every single person present.

Kang-Joon in truth felt his head spinning round-and-round after sharing greetings with so many people, while Seol Yeong wouldn’t hesitate praising Kang-Joon saying ‘He is hard-working and smart’ each time. After greeting so many people Kang-Joon actually felt tired, using every moment to recover his strained mind.

‘I am being given an opportunity.’

Every person present was a management company’s official, as such there was nothing wrong with getting acquainted with them. Management business couldn’t be done alone. There was no harm

in getting to know people from each corporation as in business relationships were as important as money after all.

Seol Yeong was introducing Kang-Joon to everyone, she was also trying to plant a good impression. She probably didn't think Kang-Joon would work at Hero Management forever. Therefore, as someone starting their own business would need to meet these people beforehand she was doing her best introducing them now.

‘She is a genuinely generous person.’

Among them, there were those who knew Kang-Joon's name, and for that reason offered him a slightly strained greeting. But Seol Yeong's easily overturned those situations with her quick wits.

In many ways, Seol Yeong was a superior who cared for the others, and, as such, the impression she passed was quite favorable.

‘With a little touch like this it is no wonder she ran a big corporation.’

Personal connections are important and together with a positive infrastructure are considerable merits to function. But even though the company president was important but so was the hand-on workers. If they receive a good impression some issues present in a group can be easily dealt with without one's direct interference.

Even though he couldn't be sure Seol Yeong was aware of it, the only thing Hero Management didn't had was Hunters and nothing more, should it ever get back on track it certainly would experience a crazy growth. Kang-Joon looked at Seol Yeong being acquaintances with almost every person from the managements, all of them being friendly.

There were few people who would dislike having to interact with a beautiful girl with a gentle smile like Seol Yeong.

When he start his business in earnest, it wouldn't be hard to establish a cooperation system between each management, and it would allow them to smoothly deal with the smaller matters.

However, Kang-Joon was still an amateur in some details, he still had many things to learn from Seol Yeong.

Every Knight was bustling somewhere enjoying their last week of vacation in the Knight Temple. There were even some officials already conversing with candidates.

As Seol Yeong was going to have a long conversation, Kang-Joon was told to go inside in advance. As the period of rest was fairly long Seol Yeong had to grasp how the management industry was nowadays, in the end, the casual conversations Seol Yeong was doing was in fact really important.

“Her popularity is huge, isn't she more famous than me?”

“It seems that way.”

Kang-Joon, who had slipped out of the greeting upheaval, nodded his head at Maria's words. To be frank, it was to the point of being considered an idol.

“Let's go in first.”

“Un.”

The two entered the Knight Temple building, where huge books were stacked up in a desk.

“Hello. Are you a family member or a management official?”

“I am Choi Kang-Joon from Hero Management.”

“Yes, Oh, Hero Management. Yes sir, it is confirmed. Do you need an information book?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, please bring a copy... I would like to inform that all hotels outside are completely booked at the moment, feel free to use the

accommodations near the Temple should you wish.

Kang-Joon took a thick book and sat near.

“How about it, make you think of the old days?”

“Well, it is certainly better than in the past.”

The Knight Temple had quite the sophisticated and modern design. It was on another dimension compared to the mutants dealings and their illegal procedures who generally occurred in the shadows. Maria giggled seeing the scene. Maria had quite the world-weary side.

“Receiving an injection sitting in a golden cushion and receive one in the dumpster are all the same.”

“Even though you say such obstinate word you know the importance of hygiene in the body modification process, don’t you?”

“Although dirty, the pain is exactly the same.”

Mutants or Knights would have to face that process, although Knights had a low death-rate the process was certainly accompanied by pain. Besides, the modification process didn’t end with a simple injection as Maria described. Having to live in a port submerged in medicinal liquid for over a week, having a cube transplanted in your body and being dissected alive was some of the cases.

Maria gazed at Kang-Joon with a cunning smile.

“During the process of mutation the body goes in overdrive, and totally ignores the anesthesia. The body becomes hard and the scalpel doesn’t go in, therefore the flesh is split with an ether scalpel. With the whole empty screaming and thrashing the table of operations would be smashed in pieces, so all equipment there were preferably created with cube superalloy. As a result of the cube being forcefully inserted in an alive body’s internal organs and blood, black liquid would come out from every hole in the

body, as such, the truth is you will wonder if you want to live through that. There one's tenacity is measured by how many times and how loud they scream."

"Even with all that there still many who go there now without thinking it through?"

"Sigh, I don't know if any bastard actually wished to do it, but there were many kids stepped forward. In many ways you just become resigned to it."

Be it Knights or Mutants, the mutation process was savage and terrible on their bodies. Specially the pain experienced, as Knights receive body immunity and strength because of their strengthened bodies they aren't influenced by narcotics, and have to endure having their flesh being cut and foreign substances inserted in their blood vessels while being fully aware.

During Knights' mutation process there were more people who died from shock caused by the pain than by the side-effects. Therefore, there were many who subjugated themselves to torture for the sole benefit of getting used to pain before the body modification process.

Maria's complexion became pale white from the damage she received from her own words. Kang-Joon, on contrary, remained unmoved.

"Are you shocked by your own words?"

"This is a fear engraved in the bones, for each word I say I feel myself being cut."

"In that case why take the trouble of bringing up those sick memories?"

"I feel better when I see other people being scared."

"You too are a pervert."

"Isn't okay if I only do it once or twice?"

Hidden behind the Knight Temple fancy exterior was that sort of cruel body modification process. The strength they obtained wasn't free of charge. Maria glanced around and rose from her seat.

"I am afraid we will end up meeting someone I know. Let's go out quickly."

"It is being a long time since we reunited with the Temple's Director..."

"Do you want to see the sight of this smashed place?"

At that words Kang-Joon closed his mouth and followed Maria outside. Now they only had to escape through the gaps in the blockade formed by Seol Yeong and those people.

Chapter 18 - Red Ocean and Blue Ocean are Two Chapters of a Book (4)

After finishing a simple lunch meal the three gathered inside a room in a hotel built behind Yangpyeong. Usually all of Yangpyeong's accommodations would already be crowded, and with its hotels being fully booked, Seol Yeong decision to reserve accommodations in advance was an excellent choice.

The thick information book listed each Knight candidate's picture, height, blood type, and their overall scores in each category, finishing with their ranking based on the combined values.

“Ms. Maria, is there any standard criteria for one to select a good Knight?”

Seol Yeong asked looking at Maria, who was already helping herself to a glass of red wine. Even though Maria had carelessly flipped through some pages, she seemed to hold little enthusiasm.

“Well, in fact, seeing it directly is the fastest way to judge something. But, only the graduates this year should probably exceed 700... It would be convenient if all there was to it was looking at the rankings.”

Maria pointed at the first in the aggregate ranking, Kang Ju-Yeon. ‘Body Reinforcement A+, Weapon Proficiency A+, Teamwork B-, Willpower A+, Potential A+, Stability A-’, certainly a record befitting of a model student's report card. Of course the estimated grades shown here were based on nothing but the Knight Temple's standard, it didn't mean her body reinforcement reached the A Rank.

“This much is enough to receive C Rank immediately. And, it probably wouldn't be a difficult matter to get promoted to B Rank.”

She gave Kang Ju-Yeon a high evaluation. Yet, Maria looked at Kang Ju-Yeon's smiling profile picture and clicked her tongue.

“Despite all that I don't like this sort of kid.”

“Why?”

“It is precisely a disgust for ‘perfect students’.”

Maria extreme words were like those of a thug, actually the way she was acting was no different from a delinquent. Kang Ju-Yeon's impression and the capabilities she possessed were enough to be immediately chosen and became a new employer in any big enterprise.

“It's not only my prejudice, the probability of these ‘perfect students’ committing serious mistakes is about 1.76 times higher than an ordinary person. These type of kids are only bastards who learned how to score well. Look at it this way, did any teacher ever had them participate in a real fight?”

It would be a mistake to pick based only on these scores, it wasn't uncommon for people to end up wetting themselves when ingressing in an actual fight. Kang-Joon too nodded his head knowing the reason Maria said such words was not wrong.

“I want to compliment you for acknowledging your bias.”

“In any case, high-ranked candidates scouted under the right conditions have, evidently, an enormous entertainment potential... the required down-payment is probably just as big...”

Hero Management didn't possess the capital of those big companies. Clouds and Lescian invested a lot to recruit a large number of Knights graduates this time, being impossible to know how many people they would absorb during their collection. Kang-Joon completed his explanation,

“We want to find out if there is anyone in the lower rankings we can use.”

“Hm...”

A ranking is, in the end, something which includes a degree of objectivity.

After all, rankings were a merciless division and possessed a rigid hierarchy where those at the end were inferior and the ones on top superior, where the chance of it being incorrect increased accordingly with its objectiveness. Kang-Joon was an easy example of that.

As such, there was only one thing Maria could say about finding anyone they could use among those ranked at the bottom.

“Well, I will see what I can do.”

“They are currently designing Dunccheon new city. The construction work should be at its peak now, its probable large management companies are already desperate, all trying to obtain jurisdiction over it. Being under the government jurisdiction yet without any assigned manpower at the moment, its jurisdiction will most likely be granted to a team who could properly dedicate themselves to Dunccheon.”

“That situation would require a great number of newcomers.”

“Yes. Therefore, the big companies will clash with each other trying to recruit as many Knights as possible during the Knight’s completion ceremony this time.”

Acting thoughtlessly might result in the situation like that of a shrimp fighting against a whale to occur. There are were many unfavourable conditions. Big companies were trying to scout high quality manpower from the start, but this time 2 of them would go through a bloody competition.

Although one is already a proven talent from the moment they complete the Knight training course, everyone there always wanted to choose the most remarkable among them.

“Hm.”

Knights were people in the end, finishing a course didn't mean they wouldn't be terrified in a proper fight nor does it prevent them from dying in the future. Besides, Hunters moved in groups, if the Knight at the frontlines doesn't fulfill their job, the rest might have to experience dangers together.

As such it wasn't a question who concerned merely the life of a single person. Maria hesitated for a moment then replied,

“Even though I can't think of those bastards from the big companies sweeping everyone, if we are gonna focus on the lower rankings, we should look for those who performed poorly on the Body Reinforcement and Weapon Proficiency categories but with high Willpower and Stability.”

“Why is that?”

“Low Stability means one has poor control over their body reinforcement, in that case one might reinforce their legs in the middle of a battle when, in fact, one needs to strengthen their arms, sending them flying. You and I know well the gravity of such accident in the middle of battle, right? And about Willpower... If a Knight flees because his hand was severed in half, is that not the same?”

“That is true.”

In fact, the capabilities the Management industry made the most use of at the moment were mainly Body Reinforcement, Weapon Proficiency, and Teamwork. Because of that the same pattern could be seen on those ingressing in the field at the moment, the industry created an atmosphere where only those abilities visible with one's eye were valued.

“From the highest priority we have Stability on top, followed by Willpower, Teamwork, Potential, Weapon Proficiency, and Body Reinforcement. There should be no problem if we follow this order. This way we can avoid any pitfalls.”

“All right, let’s look through them.”

Seol Yeong and Kang-Joon searched the information book, going through the low ranked candidates they could use one by one. And, as there was only one information book, the two had to, evidently, sit close together while looking through it.

“How about this person?”

“Well... I don’t know. Teamwork is probably too low...”

“...”

Maria looked at that sight and felt a strange emotion she couldn’t describe. There were a big difference on age, however, as it stood, they had the atmosphere like that of an older brother and little sister. Maria had no way of knowing that was something close to jealousy. As it is, it seemed she had to become aware of that sort of feeling on her own.

Seol Yeong young face. Clean and flawless skin without a single blemish like one would only believe seeing in a baby.

Despite what Maria thought she couldn’t suppress the strange feeling.

Seol Yeong young face.

Seemed unusual.

“Psst. Ms. President.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Well... Look at me for a moment.”

Seol Yeong gazed at Maria with an innocent expression, Maria looked at Seol Yeon’s eyes as if to pierce through them. Other people might not, but Maria could tell. It was difficult to sense, even with the unusual body senses she had developed.

Something heterogeneous was moving inside Seol Yeong’s black pupils. Seol Yeong was unaware such signs were present inside her

own pupils. Seol Yeong avoided eye contact as soon as Maria severe gaze locked on her own.

“Wh-What is the matter?”

“Hospital, you should pass there sometime.”

“What?”

“Whenever I look in other people’s eyes I am able to understand a little of their health condition, Ms. President body is not that good at the moment.”

At that words Seol Yeong seemed to realize something, her complexion turning pale.

“A-Ah... Yes. It is really like that.”

Maria was able to grasp Seol Yeong’s true state through only a single look in her eyes. Although the signs were very weak, Maria was able to capture the faint indications in her. Sympathy couldn’t help but seep on the gaze looking at Seol Yeong.

Kang-Joon didn’t concentrate on their conversation and still had his eyes fixed on the information book...

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A long time later,

“This is a little problematic.”

“What is the problem?”

“Are people of this level too low?”

“No... that is not what I mean.”

They had to pick out the people they could use among those ranked in the last 100. However, Kang-Joon saw that this information book was slightly odd. He quickly skimmed the information book, checking all candidates’ profiles. He then asked Maria,

“How many people graduated when you finished your course?”

“Um... Approximately a thousand people? It was probably about that much.”

“There’s 700 now, so the number of people reduced.”

“The number of admissions must have decreased.”

“No, that is not it.”

Kang-Joon pointed at the profiles’ ‘aspiration’ column in the information book.

“The people here are all aspirant Knights.”

“Uh...”

Kang-Joon propped up his chin with one hand and continued as if talking to himself.

“This information book doesn’t have a single Templar on its name list. It is missing part of the ranking.”

Kang-Joon had doubts about why among that many people there was not even one Templar. And, confirmed it seeing every person Aspiration category was filled with Knights. However, Seol Yeong and Maria reactions to Kang-Joon’s speculations was that it was coincidence.

“Well... Managements are recruiting Knights aspirants from the start, therefore, not having the Templar candidates doesn’t matter, right?”

“How can it not matter? If it comes to that they should have given us the complete ranking list from the start. Looking at it critically, having to separate only the aspirants Knights takes more than creating a mixed ranking list.”

Seol Yeong nodded her head as if she understood what Kang-Joon was trying to say.

“As management companies could approach the Templars candidates, that information itself was completely sealed in a large-scale.”

The aspirants Knights admitted in the Temple are, in the end, students, Templars also had families. As such, there were also those who tried to recruit as many Templars as possible. Even though there were complicated circumstances, like imposing a mandatory quota of free-lancer Knights to avoid Union's monopoly over them and more, the decision of whether to become a Knight or Templar remained, in the end, up to the individual's freedom.

“Indeed, ever since managements arrived for the completion ceremony no information relating to Templars was given..”

It would be a huge headache if a management official caught wind of a person about to become a Templar.

“In various aspects, in those conditions they had to come up with these sort of preventive measures to avoid losing Templar Knights.”

“So what are you intending to do? After all, our options have not changed.”

At Maria's question Kang-Joon laughed.

“Didn't the big companies set their eyes on the upper ranked Knights?”

“Yeah.”

“In that case we will take out the top ranked Templars.”

“W-What are you talking about?”

“One will face nothing but difficulty to enter it once, but if one can approach the Templars, it is exactly like a blue ocean.”

Ignoring the middle process for the moment, if one is able to do that it is indeed quite an excellent idea. If one is able to persuade them in a place without any form of management, it is a method one can obtain a top ranked Templar for free. Maria giggled hearing Kang-Joon's words.

“It’s a good idea, but what do intend to do? It is not as if we have the correct list of names.”

“You will get it.”

“...What?”

“Please help with just this tiny bit.”

Kang-Joon shameless request left Maria speechless. She only had the following words to reply,

“You, I am starting to consider BS-ing is the only thing you can do.”

It went beyond BS-ing, this time Kang-Joon would be BS-ing others through a proxy.

Chapter 19 - Coincidence, Destiny (1)

Reputation was a very big intangible asset, Maria's was big enough to cause those at the Hunter industry to bow their heads on sight. It was probable even her face had become known nowadays.

What Maria had to attempt was very simple. Just ask at the Temple office if there was any promising candidate, saying if any good kid was present she would bring them to accompany her for a few years.

Although simple, its impact would be fairly big.

Because if one was able to follow Paladin Maria, a S Rank Knight, the experience and skills one would pick up would certainly be invaluable.

Invaluable, that was how much value Maria's reputation had.

Fortunately, the senior Knights and director Maria used to have conflict with at her time were already replaced, and no unnecessary conflict would arise.

To these Temple officials Maria was like a great senior. All she had to do was ask them to keep it a secret for the moment.

With that pretense Maria was able to secure a genuine ranking list. It was a very simple task. However, if they weren't together with her it would have certainly turned in a very troublesome matter. Maria returned the hotel leaving behind words of how she would think it through after looking at the list.

With a single small lie, the information the Temple deliberately concealed was unveiled.

"So fast?"

"Who am I?"

Kang-Joon smiled at Maria.

"You worked hard."

“Sigh, all matters aside, I don’t feel good deceiving others.”

“Don’t say that yet, if there is no promising kids we will have to think of something again.”

Maria pouted her lips hearing those words.

“if you could persuade them and brought some to accompany you would probably be followed by 20-30 people... That is almost like cheating.”

“At least use some common sense.”

Getting their hands on the genuine ranking list wasn’t exactly an illegal act, however enticing Knights with Maria as a bait would be the same as swindling. Above all, it would become a huge disgrace to Maria and, as her best friend, Kang-Joon didn’t even consider doing such.

Maria’s task had come to an end, now it was Kang-Joon and Seol Yeong’s turn.

“Kang Ju-Yeon is still ranked first in the integrated list.”

It wasn’t easy to find such overwhelming grades, ranked first at the Knight ranking Kang Ju-Yeon was also first with the Templars applicants combined.

The aspirant Knights totalled 737 people while aspirants Templars amounted to 152, this time 889 people would be finishing the Knight course. Templar Knights acted like a sort of subdivision where people affiliated themselves with the UN before being dispatched to the world. It was no different from a type of volunteering.

Unlike other Hunters, who were treated like a bundle of money-hungry bastards and slaughter machines, Templars were respected wherever they go. It was strongly recognized as a very honorable occupation.

“In the top 30 the 2nd, 15th, 19th, and 24th were replaced.”

If one is inside the top 30 the down-payment they would receive at upfront would be, of course, enormous, and the calculation of their share would also definitely be good.

The first one checked was, naturally, the 2nd place. The profile was of a black-haired young girl with short hairstyle and a very cold impression. Most of all, the look in her eyes was so sharp it could be felt through the picture.

Name: Seo Aran

Body Reinforcement A+, Weapon Proficiency A+, Teamwork F (Fail), Willpower P, Potential A, Stability P

“What is this, was there such classification? What does P stand for?”

Looking at it together, Maria examined the P present at the Will and Stability sections before tilting her head.

“Shouldn’t it be P from Perfect?”

“That should be it. Otherwise having completely failed in Teamwork with an F it wouldn’t be possible to become 2nd in the combined rankings.”

“Alas, whatever it is, this child is an item worth collecting. She certainly stands out among those ‘perfect students’.”

although teamwork was low, it was worth noticing that will and stability categories were on the highest level after all. Besides, being placed in the 2nd place, even after receiving a failing mark, meant a ‘perfect grade’ had a very big weight on the gradings.

And, despite searching through the information book Kang-Joon didn’t see another P score.

Despite examining others different top ranked Templars, Maria placed her hand on Seo Aran without hesitation as if something had caught her eyes.

“I recommend this child, unconditionally. 2nd place Seo Aran.”

“Why?”

“You should be able to understand it at a glance.”

Maria laughed.

“This child is a damned freak.”

“...”

At that words Seol Yeong was slightly stunned, Kang-Joon let out a light laugh as if he understood why Maria thought like that.

“You, what are you are getting at is how the individual who scored 2 perfects failed totally on Teamwork.”

“Yup.”

More than the Perfects, Maria considered that the 2nd place scoring F on Teamwork was, in fact, more note-worthy.

“Could you explain the reason you recommend her?”

“This kid is the real deal.”

“What?”

“If she really received a Fail on teamwork that means this kid is different from those bums who are reluctant to perform their task, worrying about their grades. This kid trained sincerely. It was with that sincerity the 2nd place was secured, is that not great? Isn't this 2nd place more deserving of being the 1st than the current number 1?”

Somehow that sounded like sophistry, Kang-Joon stepped in commenting. Maria spent a long while like that, pointing at the picture adamantly explaining reasons to scout Seo Aran.

“Also, take a look at the look in this child's eyes.”

“Her eyes?”

“In the past, yours were exactly the same.”

Though Seo Aran's eyes weren't glaring, her gaze was filled with

coldness. Hearing those words Seol Yeong studied Seo Aran picture closely.

“Mr. Kang-Joon had this sort of look in his eyes?”

“Well... It was probably something similar.”

Now Kang-Joon had an indistinct impression, one fairly gentle yet one that displayed its sharpness upon closer inspection. Its aspects more suave than intense. Therefore, it looked like the direct opposite from Seo Aran's. Kang-Joon released a well concealed sigh looking at Seo Aran picture.

“This sort of type is a little... difficult.”

“With you being of similar types what would be difficult?”

“Originally it was said people dislike the same kind.”

“Err... Should we really scout her?”

“We must give it a try. I am certain this child is on a different level than that ‘perfect student’ placed 1st.”

Maria maintained a steadfast gaze as if to assure Seol Yeong. Teamwork was a very important value, and having an F there implied including an enormous flaw rivaling the strong points she possessed. Kang-Joon looked at Seo Aran's profile picture one more time. Maria knew what that look in one's eyes meant, and so did Kang-Joon.

That look filled with fierceness was that of someone who loathed monsters.

It wasn't necessary to put up with risks on purpose. Seo Aran received a fail in Teamwork, however, hunting was usually done in teams. Teamwork was important during mere exercises, needless to say its importance in a battlefield where one's life is at stake.

Yet, Maria recommended Seo Aran vigorously,

and like Kang-Joon, whose senses were a determining factor in surviving until now, Maria's senses were equally outstanding.

“Since it is like that, with you requesting like this, we should give it a try once. ”

“Are you sure you will not regret it?”

Seol suddenly realized these two were leaving out a very important issue.

“In that case, how will we draw out an aspirant Templar as if she was a Knight?”

At that words Maria pointed to Kang-Joon, and Kang-Joon spoke with an unconcerned expression,

“We can start thinking about that now.”

In other words, they had absolutely no plans.

Chapter 20 - Coincidence, Destiny (2)

Tuesday,

Seo Aran was sitting in a cafe in Yangpyeong's downtown. Excluding the organization's excursions, it was the first time in 2 years she was going out outside alone.

Until next week's graduation ceremony the Knights candidates were able to go out during the week without restrictions. Although that period of time was to get in contact with the management companies, that didn't specifically mean one needed to stay at home. Among all of them there was a lot of diversity, with some who indeed got in touch with the managements, others going out to eat food they enjoyed before to those who would go out and drink heavily. Once one was able to control their enhanced bodies, drinking alcohol without getting drunk wasn't difficult.

Because of their lifestyle, which was more army-like than the army itself, there were many who went crazy, hopping around like a foal, when they were released from all that suppression. The vacation was still long and they had received their allowance, it wouldn't be a big problem to meet the managements later.

However Aran held no special interest on that sort of thing. She was alone, once the vacation ends and the completion ceremony is held she will become a Templar, leave Korea, and join a Templar squad under the Union. In fact, it would be no different from being a soldier, the same controlled and austere lifestyle.

"We are thinking of starting with 8:2 ratio with US\$ 80,000 as down-payment. If you look here at the contract..."

"Ah... Yes, that is indeed the case.

"I hope I am not being impolite but has any other management..."

"Earlier Lescian proposed US\$ 80,000 in 5 years, and an 8.5 : 1.5

ratio...”

“Ah, that... In that case, we at Cloud promise to lend you C-Class equipment free of charge.”

“Oh, that is good.”

Behind Aran sounds of a hushed conversation was heard. Behind her was the Temple’s first place, Kang Ju-Yeon, negotiating with a different Cloud’s official. The weight ‘the Knight Temple’s top graduate’ carried was enormous. However, Seo Aran aspired to become a Templar, and didn’t have any particular involvement with the Knights’ world.

That isn’t to say she looked down on it, she just had no interest on it from the start. Her objective wasn’t money, therefore, how much their down-payment was, or how good were their conditions, all of that was irrelevant.

Kang Ju-Yeon herself received many concessions and favours, and the recruitment competition for the top 30 was no different from war.

However, companies would never suffer losses intentionally. All of them understood that, from the moment a contract was signed, they would have to run without stop until they could earn more than their down-payment and make profit. Some candidates were charmed by the high deposit and there already those who were quick in signing the contract.

“Since it is like that, please think about it well and feel free to call me whenever you want.”

“Yes, I will think about it. Thank you for the hard work.”

“Ah, excuse me.”

The official departed from his seat, and Kang Ju-Yeon had a drink once the conversation ended. Then she slowly approached the place Aran was.

“Seo Aran, what you doing?”

Seo Aran listened silently while filling her cup. Aran was someone of few words, a soldier treasured his words if the situation didn't make them necessary. Her voice too was as cold as the look in her eyes, and for that reason there were many people who misunderstood.

Kang Ju-Yeon was beautiful, and knew well how to make herself attractive, despite being somehow spiteful. The Knights candidates, regardless of ranking, were all a little cranky with the graduation being just up ahead, having to go through that terrible body modification process not long ago.

“Haa... This is seriously annoying, it is so difficult to search for a good place... I am scared of being swindled as well, you have it good. Everything will be all right as long as you just do as you are told.”

Hearing Kang Ju-Yeon's words Aran stared at her motionless. Saying in a clear voice.

“Un, you too could become a Templar.”

“No way... The army isn't my thing. How do I say... I want to decide my own life.”

“Then do so.”

Kang Seo-Yeon expression turned slightly stiff at Aran's placid response. Aran always stayed expressionless like steel. Never displaying any emotions. They were admitted in the Knight Temple in the same period, Kang Ju-Yeon never having lost the 1st place for a moment, while Aran, despite oscillating between the 2nd and 5th places, kept the 2nd place.

But, different from what one would expect, Aran didn't act jealous nor was she obsessed with the rankings. However, Ju-Yeon didn't to concern herself with Aran any longer. The roads their lives had taken were very different, no longer being connected.

Ju-Yeon herself couldn't understand what she truly felt for Aran. She was always the winner, defeating Aran every single time. However, Aran didn't show any reactions to those defeats.

While she was surrounded by people, feeling superior being placed 1st on the overall evaluations, Aran was honing her weapon skills silently in the gymnasium. It was always the same. As if Aran didn't place any big importance in anything in life. Ju-Yeon had many friends and very friendly relationships. She was liked by many and even had some secret affairs on the Temple.

However Seo Aran was a different species. No friends, few words, and no interests.

She trained like it was her job. Though Kang Ju-Yeon always won of that very same Aran, the aftertaste was never enjoyable. Above all, Seo Aran received Perfect scores, which are seldom seen, on two categories.

But it was time to part with that odd feeling now.

-Jiiing!

“Uh, I am being called once again... So annoying.”

Ju-Yeon rose from her seat and waved at Aran slightly. And Aran gave a small nod.

“Work hard.”

Ju-Yeon exited the cafe while Aran continued sitting, sipping at her coffee. She didn't place much importance in the conversation she had with Ju-Yeon. Be it someone who competed with her on every little thing, or even someone looking at her with scorn, those didn't hold any form of meaning for her.

She just thought some wouldn't understand what were obvious to others.

Only the moments of fighting were important for her, nothing but that. Once she become a Templar she would be able to fight

without restraint. Fighting to kill monsters without holding back.

Templars roamed the outside world, when one initiates their assignment in earnest they will be sent to the world's most vulnerable areas and will henceforth leave behind Korea's protection.

As such, one would not come back to Korea from that moment on. Having no attachments left, Aran wasn't concerned. Communication also wouldn't be a big problem as she had spent her spare time studying english.

She would be leaving Korea from now on. Thinking she had killed enough time in the cafe, she went outside fantasizing of herself taking part in a Core outbreak situation.

-Chime

Opening the door with a bell sound, she found herself face-to-face with a man, who seemed in his late twenties, wearing a suit looking at herself with a smile.

"Hello."

"...Eh?"

Seo Aran froze for a moment, forgetting what to say. That man took out his business card and handed it to her.

"Could I talk to you for a moment?"

'Hero Management' and manager 'Choi Kang-Joon' were written in the business card. Aran gazed at that for a moment with a stunned expression. She was an aspirant Templar, therefore, there was no reason for managements to get in contact. However, after a moment, Aran replied with a voice as if possessed by something.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

Kang-Joon led the way despite being surprised by that words.

Awakens, Mutants, Knights, Pure Hunters, whatever they are. Once we put aside having talent or not, those who want to become a Hunter can usually be classified in two categories.

People who wanted to make a lot of money.

And People who loathed monsters.

Seo Aran was one of those who belonged to the latter.

She lost her entire family in an event 4 years ago now denominated 'Jecheon's Incident'. The details concerning the events in Jecheon were simple. A C-Class dungeon appeared in the basement of an abandoned construction site, at that time the wide-area energy detector that monitored the surroundings failed to sense the dungeon energy wave.

The dungeon who manifested itself underground, and the wide-area sensor who malfunctioned.

It was the outcome of two improbable coincidences overlapping. The wide-area energy sensor installed in Jecheon was not produced according to the requirements, because of the manufacturers' replacement of mechanical parts the breakdown was but a foretold conclusion. Even though later Jecheon's incident was called a man-made tragedy, that didn't affect the outcome it brought at the time.

It only took a few days since its appearance on reality for an unconquered C-Class Dungeon to strengthen its monsters. A C-Class dungeon's monsters, appearing without any form of forecast and unexpectedly reinforced with A Rank monsters,

they swept through Jecheon's downtown effortlessly without obstructions, devastating its surroundings.

She was only fourteen at the time, merely at the 1st grade of middle school. As the sunset fell, on the way from school, she could clearly experience the roars and screams' outbreak.

"They are monsters!"

“Run away!”

“Hunters, Hunters!”

-Crunch! Thump!

Seeing people being crushed, broken like puppets with severed strings, she froze unable to move properly. She saw the Hunter soldiers in charge of Jecheon struggling desperately against the A Rank monsters, which appeared unexpectedly, all of them dying. Caught unprepared the monsters easily robbed people of their lives.

Unfortunately, Aran’s parents had arrived at school to pick her up, they had already left the car and were running to her.

“Aran! Run!”

Mom and dad came running hurriedly,

-Crunch!

A monster with the appearance of a hulking beast approached with tremendous speed, biting on her mother’s waist swinging its head sideways crazily,

-Bam!

Her father was kicked in the air with a frontal kick and sent flying. Aran saw all that happening in front of her eyes clearly. Her mother hanged down droopily with all her bones crushed, her father fell down down, bitten by different beasts and was slowly torn in half.

Aran wasn’t able to scream in front of that surrealistic scene and just stood numbly.

“Haa, Haa...”

What is this?

Aran couldn’t think of anything else.

“Evacuate!”

“Normal citizens please follow the evacuation guidelines!”

A military unit was urgently dispatched and came down the trunk in a wink releasing a barrage with their heavy firearms. Jecheon’s downtown became hell.

-FRRRRRRRRRAK! Baaang!

The machine-gun spouted fire, and the launcher gave the monster a direct-hit. However, the A Rank monster was only stalled for a moment, snarling, waiting for the gunfire to stop. In that moment it was possible to see with one’s own eyes that even heavy firearms had difficulty inflicting damage on monsters of A Rank or higher.

Aran did not think, she reflexively ran back without clear aim. Strangely no tears sprouted, she only had this hazy thought all of this wasn’t real. The deployed military unit’s line of defense was already crumbling under the raid of numerous A rank monsters.

Above all, the dungeon boss, Wyvern, was as huge as the city hall building, and, according to the post time evaluation, was estimated to be of S Rank.

Even though military divisions were quickly deployed to Jecheon it would be necessary time for them to arrive, and Aran, together with others students, as well as the school personnel hid themselves in a prepared subterranean bunker, being able to do nothing except pray to the heavens monsters wouldn’t come in.

“H-Hic!”

“Yeoran... Yeoran is dead...”

“What are the Hunters doing?! Isn’t for times like these we have those bastards!”

The people huddled in the subterranean bunker cursed the Hunters, the army, the world and wailed. The school’s bunker didn’t receive much attention during its construction, and, although underground, the steel door would be smashed

mercilessly in front of the monsters' strength.

The gunshots had already ceased long ago. Signifying only one thing.

The army had collapsed. All of them kept quiet.

[Regarding the current monsters' uprising incident in Jecheon, military personnel is heading to the critical places and military divisions are in the middle of being mobilized together with the Hunter emergency team. For all the citizens currently hearing this broadcast, we hope everybody can take cover in the bunkers maintaining the doors firmly closed until this incident is fully settled. The situation will be resolved as soon as possible.]

Even though the military personnel brought constant emergency updates, the monsters remained near while no gunshots were heard.

Chapter 21 - Coincidence, Destiny (3)

The announcements caused some of the fearful people to broke out in curses while others would start shivering once again.

Jecheon was in state of panic, a defensive line was already encircling Jecheon's downtown and was slowly shrinking and being readjusted. To prevent their escape outside the method the Hunter emergency team inside utilized was bringing down the monsters one at time.

The price was that strategy would certainly consume a lot of time.

Aran stared at the bunker's cement floor with a blank face. Her mother and father died without even being able to scream, while she couldn't do anything. Feeling sad and powerless tears flowed while she gritted her teeth.

People had fallen in a state of panic. 'Here is dangerous' or 'We have to move to a different bunker', there were people babbling about such things not far away. Aran was able to clearly see how unsightly people could be when their lives were at risk.

Suddenly there was fights, suddenly there was crying, suddenly there were groups.

-Dong, Dong, Dong

Suddenly, somebody knocked on the door.

"Please open it! Please open! Quick!"

An urgent voice was heard across the door. The survivor, who was hiding somewhere, rushed to the underground bunker urgently.

"Teacher! Teacher! Please open the door! Monsters are coming! Monsters!"

"Is that a survivor?"

“Quickly open the door!”

One female teacher ran to the door, but was stopped by someone.

“No! Do not open!”

“W-What are you saying vice-principal!”

“If you open the door monsters will come in together! Everyone here will die!”

“It will be okay if we open and close it quickly!”

Although the female teacher tried to argue, the vice-principal broke out in cold-sweat, persistently shaking his head.

“No! All the people here will be killed trying to save a single person. Think rationally teacher Kim!”

Aran could see the others’ expressions clearly. Everyone agreed more with the vice-principal’s words than with the female teacher’s. The female teacher as well had her expression turn stiff thinking about it.

“Please open! Please open it! Please... Please!!”

The young girl’s voice seemed frantic. However no one tried to approach the door. Although it seemed no monsters were present, it was unknown, and only one, if only one monster came in a massacre was sure to follow.

These people though it was better to let someone die than to place their lives at risk opening the door for a moment. Teacher or student, all of them made a terrible decision, one they would never do otherwise, in this moment of life-or-death.

At that moment all them became unfamiliar to Aran.

Everyone avoided each other eyes, lowering theirs heads not uttering a word. At this moment they were all the same.

To Aran, rather than the monsters, these people were more disgusting.

She raised from her seat suddenly, running to the door, loosening the hinges and locks in a moment, completely throwing open the steel gate behind.

“W-What are you doing?”

“She is mad!”

She thought it would be better if a monster were to enter and kill these crazy people. In front, a female student filled with tears and snot threw herself through the door desperately, there was no monster on the bunker’s downward corridor.

“Y-You! You!”

The vice-principal, face growing red, failed to control his temper pointing at Aran. The female teacher appeared soon and embraced the female student who entered forgetting her cold decision.

“Ju Hui-Ya!”

“Waaaahhh!”

The person who came in wailed, the friends who recognized that child came running, in groups of two or one, and hugged her in a moment. Aran watched that sight first-hand from the bunker’s entrance forgetting to say anything. Whoever heard their voices would notice the feeling of sadness mixed with happiness, for having left her to die and for her to have successfully came in.

That two emotions were real. Aran slammed the gate shut. However, she stood outside the bunker. She didn’t want to remain in that closed space which somehow seemed like a foreign world.

-Click!

Perhaps it was the vice-principal, the door was locked as soon as it closed. Monsters didn’t open doors with their hands, smashing them open instead. As such, locking the door would do no good. Aran felt that action was very strange. Only crying sounds could be heard from inside, there was no one who tried to stop Aran from

suddenly rushing out nor was there calls to return.

Aran rushed up the staircase coming out the school. She had rather die than be in that sort of crazy place gripped with hopelessness.

Jecheon's incident had yet to be quelled down when the day passed, sunset was once again forming in the sky. No trace of monsters could be found on the playground. And, Aran could see an enormous black object in the sky approaching with incredible speed.

“Haa, Haa, Haa...”

She ran like crazy. Fleeing through the playground, while the fast approaching black object crashed his body against the school.

-Craaaash!

The school building was smashed in a moment, throwing up a cloud of dust. As a result, choosing to die become the choice who saved her life, not having being built so deeply, and with the school's collapse, the bunker had caved in.

The giant Wyvern, the most powerful and the biggest monster inside the dungeon stirred, raising his body.

“Gyaaaaah!”

The monster released an ear-splitting cry shaking his body, that movement collapsing some far-away parts of the school. And Aran realized how feeble her conviction to die was.

This was an bone-chilling fear, because of it Aran's thoughts of walking into that monster's mouth crumbled apart. Aran ran out the school without aim. The school's bunker collapsed, those who were inside had all being crushed to death.

Aran crazy action allowed her to live alone, escaping and running without clear goal. The soldiers would have stablished a defense line somewhere, and only by reaching it would one be able to

survive. However, Aran wasn't able to make that kind of the decision. Only running like crazy to escape from that giant monster.

However, Jecheon was already overrun by monsters.

After passing some streets and stray dogs, Aran came across frightening black-furred beasts while loitering the streets.

Three huge beasts three meters high resembling monkeys discovered Aran. The monsters were in the middle of digging through corpse, with red blood dripping from their mouths.

“Grooowl!”

“Haa, Haa... Haa...”

Aran collapsed on her knees. Far from the giant monster, even those monkeys could easily tear her apart. The monsters, which were in the middle of a feast, wouldn't let a survivor escape because of it. It was clear those beasts would tear off her neck now.

-Slam!

However, just before those black beasts touched Aran, they collided against something and were sent bouncing back.

Aran saw somebody standing in front of her eyes. Around his body ironlike fingernail-sized hexagons floated in the air slowly.

A moment ago, that hexagon shaped iron pieces assembled together forming a wall, and the beasts collided against it being bounced off. Aran saw it clearly. Even though she could only see his back, that person carried a shining sword in his right hand, and a silver revolver on his left.

In fact, it wasn't until much later on that she got to know those iron pieces floating around were in fact part of the strongest armour coat, a Panel Suit.

“Here is Union-o, a survivor was found. A girl in the early teens, repeat. Union-o, a survivor was found. Three beasts identified,

three monkeys, awaiting instructions.”

[We will take on the Boss, you get away. Can you do that alone?]

“No problem.”

[Good. If you discover additional survivors continue reporting.]

“Alright, I am leaving.”

With the sudden enemy’s appearance the monsters stood a distance away without approaching, growling. Aran too was bewildered with the Hunter’s sudden appearance. He looked down at her, deactivated his Aether sword wearing it on his waist right side.

“How many fingers are here?”

Then he held out his little finger asking Aran. And she replied in a trembling voice.

“O-One... Just one.”

That Hunter, confirming Aran wasn’t in panic, extended out his little finger.

“Here, hold my finger. Just like when doing a promise. Come on, quick.”

Aran wondered what reason was there to suddenly lock pinkies in this situation. However, she, as if moved by something, intertwined her finger on that man’s.

“You have to hold like this until we escape from here, okay? If you keep your promise we will be able to get out safe and sound.”

“Gyaaaaaaah!”

The monkey monsters, not being able to endure in the end, pounced at the man, and he pulled the trigger without even glancing in their direction.

-Bang!

The white shine on the revolver grew bigger and something was

shot. And a monster upper body just flew away. She watched that overwhelming scene without screaming. That man slowly walked in the monster's direction while holding Aran's little finger. They walked leisurely, without rushing or running.

"Slowly, everything will be okay if you follow me."

Aran walked slowly, forcefully dragging her powerless legs. While the man faced the incoming monster a few times, pulling the trigger.

-Bang, Bang, Bang!

Blasts spouted out in flashes, and the monsters, which continued their futile attempts, had their heads or bodies easily exploded while the man continued speaking to Aran.

"It's safe with me. Continue, following. Try saying it."

"W-with you... Continue, continue following."

"Very good."

Aran walked slowly through the sections of the chaotic Jecheon while holding the Hunter's pinky as if on a stroll. The man feeding Aether blasts to the incoming monsters with each step.

When a silent attack came from a blind spot they would be fended off by the protective barrier formed by the Panel Suit, and he then neutralized them easily, changing between blasts and sword as needed.

Soon destruction and explosions reverberated in the direction the giant monster was in. Aran looked back. In the place the school used to be a dense cloud of dust was raising fiercely.

-Boom! Boom! Boom!

Jecheon's incident was suppressed before 2 hours had passed after an unidentified Hunter team entered. At that time, more than 30,000 people had died in Jecheon.

Aran was guided by that Hunter safely going over the defensive

line, and the man walked back in the chaotic Jecheon's downtown. Aran was handed over to the survivors' aiding team and supplied some simple relief supplies.

As soon as the disaster causes came to light there were numerous voices asking for the punishment of those in the industry who were involved.

By the time people forgot about that event, all related company representatives were sentenced to fines.

And,

all those business representatives involved in Jecheon's incident went missing a few months later. Although an investigation about the possibility of murders as a form of revenge was carried there were no traces anywhere.

After the incident, she completed a related program in the country to become a Hunter. And, having her aptitude as Knight noticed, she remained in protection facilities until becoming of appropriate age before entering the Knight Temple. She hated the monsters and also hated her own powerlessness before them. The finger of the person who rescued her and that warmth were engraved in her soul.

Therefore she wanted to hunt those monsters.

She wanted to work for the benefit of those people suffering from monsters. Like the man from that time, interlock pinkies as if doing a childish promise in order to save someone, she wanted to become that sort of person.

And now,

“Because of that Templar work isn't as simple as you think. And there is also...”

In front of her eyes, the man from that time was looking at Aran with a very serious expression talking non-stop.

However, none of those numerous words reached Aran's ears.

She couldn't figure out why that man joined a management nor why did he chat excitedly like this like a shady salesman. Nevertheless, as soon as Aran faced him the answer was fixed.

"Yes."

"What I want to say is you should think once more about becoming a Templar... Yes?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

The abrupt agreement left Choi Kang-Joon dumbfounded.

Chapter 22 - Coincidence, Destiny (4)

“I’ll do it.”

“Y-You will do it..? What...”

“Didn’t you come in order to make a contract?”

“Ah, that, even though that isn’t wrong... Why so sudden like this...”

“I will become a Knight.”

Although she could become a Templar, she thought there was something to this unexpected and accidental meeting. The one who saved her life, and the person she yearned for was in front of her eyes. Aran still remembered that day vividly, when he extended her his little finger and they walked through the gaps in a mountain of corpses.

Although it was a pity that this man seemed unable to remember that time, that wasn’t a problem.

“I will contract with Hero Management.”

“Ah... Yes, yes.”

Kang-Joon didn’t even bring out all the words he had prepared to say yet, he tilted his head wanting to know what on earth was that situation. He slowly examined Aran’s face feeling he was perhaps in the middle of a scam.

However, Kang-Joon couldn’t remember Aran. That was just a short encounter, and the 14-year-old girl of that time was now eighteen.

“Uh... Well. I managed to do it.”

“Do what?”

“Contract. She changed career’s path to Knight, and signed the

contract right away.”

“Wow! That is great! Mr. Kang-Joon is great as expected!”

“So what’s with that face?”

Seol Yeong smiled happily, and Maria tilted her head. Tracking her location at the Temple and visiting Seo Aran, Kang-Joon aimed to persuade her in a face-to-face conversation. Kang-Joon was fully confident on persuading Aran. Planning to tell her the actual reality about Templars in order to change her mind.

However, Seo Aran didn’t concentrate in the conversation at all, staring at Kang-Joon, suddenly agreeing while looking at him intently with a blank expression. As such the main points were not even presented. Kang-Joon sat at the hotel drinking a glass of water with a vacant expression.

“How did you persuade her this time? It is said all of those who intend to become Templars possess strong beliefs.”

Despite Seol Yeong’s inquiring shining eyes, Kang-Joon facial expression was that of someone who had lost their soul.

“Was the person I met really the right Seo Aran?”

Kang-Joon continued in a state of anguish worrying whether all of that was real. However, the profile and face matched, and the name was the same. Seol Yeong and Maria tilted their heads at the rare sight of a confused Kang-Joon.

But, in any case, the task had finished well in the end and they had obtained their first contract.

Although he could try contacting more people, Hero Management possessed only 3 sets of equipment at the moment. First they had to properly create one Hunter team and only then search for other personnel. Accepting people blindly was no different from attaching a bomb to oneself.

Having obtained the contract Maria’s participation had come to

an end, and receiving a call she had to hastily return.

“I will demand proper compensation for this later, you know?”

“Alright, you worked hard. Thank You.”

“Tsk, If you go back on what you said I will kill you for real.”

Maria had arrived and was leaving pulling only one carrier. Before returning, Kang-Joon came to see her off going down until the hotel’s parking lot, and Maria, after scanning the surroundings carefully, stabbed Kang-Joon’s chest with her finger.

“And you, make up your mind if you are going to leave the Union.”

“That isn’t it... I will tell you about it soon.”

“Isn’t it better to quit than to be dismissed? Old man Pang(Tl: Bread) is still waiting for your call.”

“Brad?”

“Yeah, that guy was never honest, was he?”

“I will think about it.”

“Whatever you choose, you must be sure about it.”

Leaving that words behind Maria boarded a high-end van which came to pick her up and left. And Kang-Joon watched until the car disappeared from view, returning back up after releasing a well concealed sigh.

Seol Yeong too received a call saying Choi Gina’s selected replacement had reported for duty and returned to the company.

Kang-Joon was left alone in Yangpyeong henceforth.

In the end, the majority of the Knights aspirants were scouted by Lescian and Cloud. Only a few who were lower ranked signed contracts with smaller and medium managements, and most companies returned without even watching the completion ceremony.

Most of all, the most important Templar prospect in the Knight Temple suddenly changed her career's path to Knight raising an enormous commotion. Because of that the S Rank Maria's visit was soon forgotten.

Although numerous senior Templars and instructors attempted to persuade her, Aran was unmovable. Firmly closing her lips when confronted with the reasons, only repeatedly saying she was going to become a Knight.

Aran wasn't very friendly nor talkative from the start.

And, thanks to the enormous commotion, rumors soon spread out among the candidates, and some management officials grasped that fact. The Templar who ranked 2nd in the total ranking had changed career's path to Knight. As such Lescian and Cloud swiftly approached Seo Aran.

"I have already decided on a place to contract with."

"Once you listen to our conditions..."

"No, I am contracted with a place."

"And where might that be?"

"Hero Management."

"...Excuse me?"

Lescian's official hearing Aran's reply wondered whether he had heard it wrong. However, he had indeed heard Hero Management. Seo Aran, placed 2nd in the overall rankings, was going to a now collapsed Management.

"We offer US \$70,000 as well as B-Class equipment..."

Regardless of how much they raised the down-payment, Seol Aran was unmoved. Although they didn't know what Hero Management had offered they all thought it was something incredible, those at Lescian were trying get as many benefits as they could, and Cloud appealed through their wide jurisdiction.

However, despite all those proposals, Seo Aran shook her head stubbornly.

Therefore, Lescian and Cloud's officials were all about to explode of curiosity wondering what sort of schemes the new manager, Choi Kan-Joon, had used to scout that Seo Aran in the end. Despite Kang-Joon himself not having done anything.

‘That fellow is on something.’

As such, Lescian and Cloud, two super managements companies, were both paying close attention to Hero Management's new employer Choi Kang-Joon.

However, Kang-Joon still couldn't solve his previous doubts doing nothing except sitting at the hotel as if he lost his soul. Although Lescian and Cloud had accomplished their original objective, they were both nervous looking uncomfortable as if there was a stain in the otherwise clean surroundings.

Until the day of the anticipated graduation ceremony.

Numerous graduates gathered at the main auditorium, and management staff and family members were seated there. With the officials and family's seats arranged separately, Kang-Joon felt as if he was sitting on a bed of nails. Lescian and Cloud's official kept looking and throwing sideways glances at him, while some even questioned him directly.

“Mr. Kang-Joon, what magic did you use after all? That girl Seo Aran, she didn't accept any down-payment I offered and I wasn't even able to get a private appointment.”

It was the Lescian's official he shared greetings a few days ago. Nevertheless, Kang-Joon could only scratch his head at those words.

“I also wish I knew what it was.”

“Hey, can't you just tell me what it was? What are you hiding?”

There was truly nothing to hide, on contrary, it was Kang-Joon who was about to go crazy with that sort of reaction having to face such situation suddenly. However, Kang-Joon was still treated like a black-hearted deceiving bastard. Sometimes, the truth didn't work.

The director made a speech, and the Knight Temple's representative completed the ceremony with an oath. The contents who were present were always the same, upholding the Knights' Honor they would face a thorny road. From now on all of them would have to fight continuously in order to survive.

The representative was Kang Ju-Yeon, and Seo Aran led the oath below the podium. Many people eyed Seo Aran as if it was unfortunate. Kang Ju-Yeon chose Lescian, and the talk concerning the contract had already concluded, however, Seo Aran sudden change of heart completely receiving all attention left her in a poor mood.

The completion ceremony came to an end, and together with the applause of the participants all the schooling finished. From now on Templars became Templars, and the Knights who became freelancers or contracted with managements would go hunting monsters.

Kang Ju-Yeon was handed an overflowing bouquet by her family and close friends, and the candidates with families were all being congratulated. Seo Aran stood alone watching that scene blankly. Those without a single family member headed somewhere by themselves.

“Seo Aran, Although I don't know why you decided to become a Knight all of a sudden... We might be able to meet once again later. It is the first time I hear of Hero Management but... Well, it will be fine if its you.”

Kang Ju-Yeon, after placing the bouquet in her arms in the floor, extended out her hand. Her facial expression seemed very happy

about something, and Aran had no idea what Kang Ju-Yeon was happy for. With her good eyes her facial expression seemed forcibly exaggerated.

She didn't have any interest in Kang Ju-Yeon from the start, whether she showed contempt or even her words themselves, Seo Aran paid them no mind. Aran shook hands expressionlessly and Kang Ju-Yeon departed leading a group of people somewhere. It was clearly a big lunch with people meant to celebrate, and Seo Aran turned her body intending to go out the exit.

“Congratulations.”

“Ah...”

As soon as she turned back Choi Kang-Joon pushed a bouquet to Seo Aran. She looked at Kang-Joon intently then bowed her head.

“You have worked hard so far.”

People were receiving their families and friends' congratulations. However, the only one who came for Seo Aran was nothing but an official from Hero Management. Seo Aran mouth's corner twitched, her lips trembling.

And, although subtle and brief, displayed a very radiant smile.

“Thank You.”

Those who knew Seo Aran were astonished she actually smiled. All she did was receive a bouquet from a manager.

However, she occasionally imagined it. Thinking once she officially finished the course and when she was ready to go out in the outside world, how good it would be if that man who saved her handed her a bouquet. But, that sort of thing could never happen, it was nothing but a delusion she recalled sometimes.

However, like a miracle, that was happening now, in reality. That Hunter who saved her was handing her a bouquet. It was reality, not a dream or delusion.

Like that Aran felt what happiness was in a truly long time.

“Would you like to go out to eat lunch? I made reserves in a good place.”

“Yeah.”

“There is a lot of people. Follow me closely.”

“Yes, Yes...”

Aran knew well reality was cold-hearted to a despairing degree at times. But today, Aran realized a new fact.

There are times reality, could be sweeter than dreams.

Aran treasured the red bouquet, holding it close to her chest, and followed Kang-Joon, who was ahead. Like it happened in the past, this time too Aran slowly followed after his back.

Chapter 23 - Our Manager The Landlord (1)

Seo Aran's Hunter certificate was already put in place by the Knight Temple and no additional work was necessary. In Choi Gina's case team leader Song filled out all relevant documents, and Seol Yeong accompanied her in acquiring an unranked Hunter certificate. Categorized as a Pure Hunter, a kind of smoke-screen tactic.

Choi Gina, who once had a heaven defying career, was henceforth an officially recognized F Rank Hunter. Although making full use of her reputation in the Hunter industry will need to be postponed, once a certain degree of reputation was formed, even if she was discovered to be a Awaken later, they would be able to finish the abilities report in any case using her already official Hunter status as a cover. Soon, Choi Gina would be able to avoid going in the so dreaded Awaken facility.

Should the military try to use force with the intention of expropriating Choi Gina, the Management would be able to file a lawsuit against it.

In various aspects, it was a method only someone like Kang-Joon with deep knowledge in the field would know.

“Starting now you two will become partners. Introduce yourselves, and get to know each other slowly.”

In Hero Management's Office, the four – Seo Aran, Choi Gina, Choi Kang-Joon, and Seol Yeong – sat around a circular table that wasn't used in quite a while. Choi Gina had an expression as if she was slightly afraid, while Seo Aran was looking at her expressionlessly as if she didn't care at all.

“I am Choi Gina... 24 years old... Please treat me well.”

Unlike the high-spirit she displayed upon becoming the Magical Girl, Choi Gina was a little passive and introvert.

“Seo Aran, eighteen, class is Knight.”

Both were equally stiff in their own way. Seo Aran understood Hero Management was no longer on its prime. She had come solely because of Kang-Joon, she obviously wouldn't have said yes to a company of such small-scale otherwise.

Choi Gina, as well, had come because of Kang-Joon's knowledge regarding an Avatar's abilities, and didn't have a big interest in hunting itself.

“I will first give some explanations. Reviewing all the contract contents... Everyone will henceforth become an affiliated Hunter working under Hero Management. Although searching for jobs for the Hunters is not under my jurisdiction, I will be giving my maximum to handle all those matters and I plan to take all action necessary to deal with them.”

As it was the first time Seol Yeong would be explaining those matters in earnest, Kang-Joon watched Seol Yeong with a serious expression as she explained while unfolding the contract.

“If you can't occupy a hunting spot during 1 month our management guarantees, as we spoke before, a base pay of US \$2,000 after-tax. However, there is some managements questions that come in place before that. Whenever you go the role of a management is simple. Search and choose places for the Hunter to hunt, support, and take care of any necessary minor matters related to the Hunter welfare as their proxy.

That is, of course, the most basic things. Suppose any of you destroyed a shop or public establishment while hunting. In that case, if you are caught in the middle of any legal actions, our management will take care of all the issues in your stead. There are management companies who house their own law teams, however, we at Hero Management had to close our law-firm because of various circumstances and are currently entrusting these incident matters to a third-party.

Likewise if you are on vacation you might want to rent a house, reserve a hotel or flight, or if all you need is a workplace or training center all you have to do is contact us, that sort of thing. That said, it is illegal for a management to forcefully employ you to areas that doesn't match your levels. Of course, this is a criterion only applicable for C Rank or higher...

The norm is for the person in question to be deployed to scenes one level lower than their rank. If one is a C Rank then a D Rank situation, and if they are of B Rank an C Rank situation. Of course, even though the rules in a S Rank situation, or higher, are an exception, the way that is handled is complicated so there will be no problem if you don't understand that part.”

Seo Aran was a D Rank based on the Knight certification, and Choi Gina was unranked. In Choi Gina's case with her real power exceeding the S Rank slightly that held no particular meaning, while Seo Aran was granted a rank lower than her actual prowess on purpose as she had no experience in a real fight . If it is a rank F scene, those two alone are enough to overpower anything on it.

“Every resource you obtain will be split with a 7:3 ratio. Cores, Aether, Cubes, anything. In this case we can confidently say that is our management advantage.”

Seol Yeon said taking a glance at the two once.

“The 3 stakes from the share Hero Management gets will pay all yours taxes, income taxes, as well as any other special costs that might arise. Therefore, if you acquire 10 F-Class cores, that 7 will go completely to you, and the remaining 3 will be disposed as money in order to settle all your share of taxes in bulk. However, there is something you should keep in mind pertaining to this.”

“Yes.”

“Please say it.”

“I will inform you continuously and let you know how much

taxes there are and how much you have to pay. About which part has any extra tariff as well as how much additional cost is attached. You must have a full understanding regarding this. There are many cases of managements who don't give Hunters the money they are due using the taxes calculations as excuse. Files are frequently manipulated and raised while there are many people who don't even show the Hunters the taxes calculation sheet. As such, as you might later go to a different management, I hope you two are well-informed and experienced when earning something and the cost of taxes is brought forward so that you are not taken advantage of in the future."

Choi Gina nodded her head, and Seo Aran did the same. Although Seol Yeong was informing them so that they wouldn't be swindled by others regardless of which management they head for in the future, the two in front were still immature and were unable to grasp the implicit meaning in Seol Yeong warning.

There were still many Hunters who were taken advantage of. Kang-Joon suddenly realized Seol Yeong was a really diligent businessman. Rather, with such diligence she shouldn't have fallen so low.

"Unfortunately, Hero Management doesn't have any work yet. And 3 persons are needed for a Hunter team in the first place. I apologize to everyone, but you will have to remain on stand-by after all. However, I will give my best and work hard so you can go on your first hunt as soon as possible."

Both nodded their head. Now they possessed two people, meeting the minimum number of required. Once they reach three they would be able to make a team, and with it created they would be able to acquire a jurisdiction as well as go through the personnel examination using it as a base. Seon Yeong then pointed to Kang-Joon.

"Mr. Choi Kang-Joon will be taking care of you from now on. Originally, a manager's role is managing a Hunter Team

movements and schedule, and, outside of entering your house, to be together and at your disposition from the moment you wake until you go to sleep. In the same form, if there is something you desire you can speak to me through Mr. Kang-Joon, or speak to me directly. It is easier if you think of the manager's job as being the connection between the Hunter Team and the company."

Looking at it in a negative light a manager is the Hunter Team's handyman, and if one look at it positively they are their guide. A good manager doesn't let the Hunter Team exhaust themselves helping them maintain their highest condition at all times, and manages their lives as a team. Although the Hunters are the most important in various ways, there were times a manager role was more important than an individual Hunter.

"However, as everyone knows, Mr. Kang-Joon has career experience as a Hunter. A special point different from all other managers. Concerning hunting and matters related to teamwork Mr. Kang-Joon has a deeper knowledge than all others. If I am being honest... I feel a little sorry for outstanding talents like you two to come to Hero Management. Nevertheless, I can confidently say you two have really met the best manager."

Being praised in front of him left Kang-Joon completely embarrassed, scratching the back of his head. There was no manager like Kang-Joon before, and there won't be in the future.

"Generally, it is important for a Hunter team to live together for some time, what does everyone think? Even though it is not obligatory... After all wouldn't it be good to get to know each other's side?"

The majority of Hunter Teams stayed together, or, even if that was not the case, lived in places very close to each other. After all no one knows when they would be called. Both Seo Aran and Choi Gina nodded their head.

"Well, since it is like that we will try to search for

accommodations as quickly as possible...”

“No, it’s okay.”

“Uh?”

Seol Yeong tilted her head hearing Kang-Joon’s words.

“There is an apartment building under my name in Sillim Dong, there should be no problem if they live together there. That is where I live. The previous owner lived in a household taking up the whole floor on the 4th level. The area exceeds 150m², and all the household appliances remain in place. As it housed many it should be sufficient to 2 young women to live.”

“M-Mr. Kang-joon would be... the landlord?”

“That’s right, after all that is something a manager should do...”

“Uh... In any case that would be great.”

Then Kang-Joon laughed speaking to them without an ounce of embarrassment.

“US \$ 1,500 month. No need for deposit.”

“...”

“Just so you know, there is a space you can use as a training room in the basement, with no additional cost.”

Seol gazed at Kang-Joon’s elated expression stunned.

Chapter 24 - Our Manager the Landlord (2)

“I am the only one who moved there so far so they won’t be troubled having to deal with strangers.”

Seol Yeong wasn’t worried and had no choice but nod her head with a blank look.

Kang-Joon paycheck increased by US \$1,500 in an instant. He had bought that building so he could take care of and be as close of the Hunter Team he would be in charge-of in the first place.

Of course, if extra income could originate from that process it would be even better. Hero Management didn’t have a dormitory in place, and Kang-Joon’s apartment complex possessed outstanding living conditions for that.

Seo Aran lived in the Knight Temple’s dorm from the start, and as a Templar candidate she didn’t give much thought to social life. As such, she had long decided to live in a place prepared by Hero Management, and had brought all her luggage, including a carrier, from the moment she arrived and reported for work at the company.

She immediately unpacked her luggage on Sillim Dong’s apartment, and Choi Gina hurried to arranged her’s on that very same day.

In Choi Gina’s case, as it was a matter concerning her life, she complied with all of Kang-Joon’s words. While Seo Aran, although never displaying any emotions on her face, would nod her head with a cool expression whenever Kang-Joon said something.

Two days passed and the new tenants were fully settled. Although Kang-Joon still lived in the first floor he frequently visited the 4th floor to assist with various matters. Sometimes he served as the organization’s messenger and others he simply exchanged stories with the group.

As of now, the Hunter among the two with highest loyalty was Seo Aran. Seo Aran wasn't an open individual in many ways and neither did she speak of herself, while the Temple divulged nothing but each candidates family relations, not speaking about matters related to each individual's past.

Of course, it was uncertain whether Kang-Joon would recall the memories of that time even if it was known Seo Aran was a survivor from Jecheon's Incident.

"Hey Aran, are you waiting for a call from someone?"

"No."

Choi Gina looked at Aran, who was holding her phone motionless, keeping that way even while shaking her head. Choi Gina as the senior spoke freely, while Seo Aran insisted on speaking respectfully. They had cleaned all the dust and finished organizing their rooms so they were now free.

Seol Yeong was busy running around searching for a job for them, and Kang-Joon was on standby here waiting to provide any assistance.

However, they waited everyday, Kang-Joon, Aran, and Gina, all of them are the same laying idle without having to go to work.

"It could always be peaceful like this..."

Even if there was no work a base pay of US \$2,000 was guaranteed. Thinking about the day-to-day stress she received only to receive US \$1,400 after tax, Gina was sure the way she was living now was more appropriate. The Hunter industry was more of a paradise than she expected, and she couldn't get used to that feeling only watching the TV absentminded.

Her family only knew of her change of jobs, completely unaware she had joined the Hunter industry. If they knew it would be chaos. Gina would release a sigh each time she thought of her family.

Aran looked into her phone or listened to music trying hard to keep a calm state of mind.

Of course, although she didn't show any expressions outside, no one but herself knew her head was a sea of flowers. She always maintained the surrounding clean, a remaining habit from the Knight Temple. And Gina, who was never one who cared in keeping the surroundings organized, started to follow the cold expressed Aran's example, who silently cleaned all the mess she made, cleaning after herself.

The most difficult thing were the meals, anything Gina and Aran prepared somehow always tasted like paper. The two were completely miserable at cooking, and after eating Gina's completely burnt fried eggs and half-cooked rice, the two understood each other.

"Let's eat some delivery food."

"Yes."

After that, they ate delivery-food everyday. After a week passed the two mouths smelled of salt. Gina was shocked to find out she gained weight living a few days like that, and Aran had decided to never place a pizza on her mouth.

Nothing happened for a week, until Kang-Joon arrived to change a broken lightbulb and fixed his eyes on two half-eaten hardened and stiff pizza pieces. Aran and Gina eyed him intently as he stood still not saying a word.

"Hm... That was my fault."

The sudden apology came, of course, from Gina, and Aran flinched.

"As I hoped the two of you to adapt to your communal life I had decided to leave you two alone, but..."

"ah..."

“We should have meals together from now on.”

Due to that, the two meals became Kang-Joon’s responsibility from that point on. He took out the side dishes piling in the refrigerator moving them all upstairs, and arranged a splendid soybean paste stew with stir-fried pork dinner that night. Although it wasn’t at level of a cook, Kang-Joon made food worth eating.

“Tell me if there is anything you want to eat. I will make it if its something I am able to.”

Kang-Joon said so nonchalantly. Gina took a spoonful opening her eyes wide then asked while eyeing him intently.

“Were managers originally supposed to cook?”

“I am not sure?”

However, one did now and the two ate without grumbling. Tired of delivery food the two ate well. With his experience as field cook, where he had to fumble around to learn, there was almost no food Kang-Joon was bad at.

Nothing happened for over a week, as the two ate breakfast and dinner together. When one day Aran spoke up during breakfast as Kang-Joon was about to serve up the rice.

“I can take care of the groceries if that is okay with you.”

But Kang-Joon shook his head at Aran words.

“That is my job, Ms. Aran.”

“That is not fair. I don’t do any work and only Mr. Manager works. It is not good to not do anything and only enjoy the benefits.”

Aran respectfully addressed Kang-Joon as ‘Mr. Manager’. And those clear words made Kang-Joon unable to reply.

“Well... Although I don’t think like that... Okay... if that is what you want to do. However, if you ever start feeling overburdened I

will take over it once again.”

“Okay.”

Since then, Aran handled the groceries and Gina took care of the dishes. And that day, Aran, who immediately went to do the grocery, returned shortly before setting off once again. Kang-Joon’s cellphone suddenly raised a cry.

“Hello?”

[I don’t know what to buy.]

Aran was currently wandering clueless about what to buy inside the mart. Seo Aran was 18 years old so, if you look at it in a certain way, that was natural. It was only in the Knight Temple that the darkness of the world was natural. Eating and living as they should, it wasn’t strange for a kid to act like one on society.

“Wait a little. I am going there. You are in the XX-Mart market, right?”

[Yes, that is right. I am sorry.]

Kang-Joon chuckled at Aran apology.

“It is okay.”

Aran and Kang-Joon walked through the market together for some time, learning about all sorts of things. Although the two looked like minors touring the market together at first glance receiving all sort of sour looks, neither Kang-Joon or Aran were concerned about that sort of thing.

The matters regarding the allocation of jurisdiction wasn’t so simple, Seol Yeong was trying to find any location worth of undertaking making full use of her personal network. However, quite some time would be needed, so they could do nothing but stay on standby. After about 2 weeks their communal life had already found its place. Gina and Aran relation was better than expected, and, although formal, there were no disputes. Aran still

visited the market together with Kang-Joon, and although basic, learned a little cooking. She originally longed to fight against monsters, however, meeting with Kang-Joon itself was satisfying enough.

Also, Aran thought there would be many things to learn from Kang-Joon about fighting as she could receive from any actual battle.

And on the second week at 8pm in the evening, a call from the messenger group arrived to Kang-Joon.

[Ms. Aran, Ms. Gina please come to the basement floor with comfortable clothes.]

Upon arriving on the first floor basement Kang-Joon stood there wearing training clothes like them.

“Lets’ go in.”

Advancing through the door Kang-Joon opened stood a quite spacious room taking the space of several other apartments. In front a mirror was installed, and the floor was soft and elastic. Despite being the product of an illegal construction its appearance was quite good and Aran and Gina were both surprised.

“It seems everyone has already adjusted to the communal life now, so...”

Kang-Joon looked at Gina and Aran alternately and said with a serious expression.

“We should start training in earnest.”

Up to now Kang-Joon was turning a blind-eye out of convenience so that they could adapt to the unfamiliar environment.

“Ms. Gina, you don’t exercise usually.”

“Eh? Ah... Yes.”

“Awaken or Mutant, what one needs to do first is having solid physical strength.”

Choi Gina didn't have an unfit figure, and if one looks closely she was on the slim side. However, that was nothing but physical condition, her muscle mass was pitiful.

On the other hand, Aran used to train like a monster, and was, in fact, still doing it. Although, according to that amount of training she was supposed to have an incredibly muscular body, thanks to her body modification she looked just slender. Nevertheless, Aran possessed enough destructive power hidden under the surface to be able to smash a cement wall.

“Both of you will be receiving training today. And, the remaining time will be going through Esper strengthening process.”

“Esper... strengthening process?”

“Like I said last time, Ms. Gina has abused the Avatar's power quite a bit. However, shouldn't we make use of an Awaken basic abilities?”

“Yes.”

“As such you have to receive training in order to get used to using the Avatar power without penalties.”

Kang-Joon would now tell Gina a secret about manifestation that only an extreme few number of people were aware of. Aran already knew Gina was the Magical Girl Acacia, and didn't have any particular reaction to that knowledge. She was never someone who would easily disregard others, she didn't have any interest itself even before that could happen. Of course, Kang-Joon was an exception. Kang-Joon took a place in front to them after having the two sit at the training area's floor.

“In the past I had a French colleague named Chloe. Now dead.”

Because of his casual words the two couldn't help but be a little shocked.

“That person was an Avatar user, and although aware that ability was dangerous couldn't help but use it a little excessively. Well,

during that time there wasn't a choice. That person was among some of the best Avatar users, and was the only one among them able to wield a strong power without making use of it. And, could almost reach the last stage an Avatar user could arrive at."

"The last stage?"

"Yes, the ability to reverse possess one's own body."

Even though it seemed like a contradiction it was actually a possible method.

Avatar was dangerous because one would become used with their spirit being separated from their real body. With that phenomenon accelerating with the strength one wielded. Gina opened her mouth as if she couldn't believe it.

"The spirit manifested out of my body possess my body again?"

"Yes. In that state you are able to use every ounce of the Avatar power with no penalties. With no overload regarding the use excessive of power."

With no overload, if the manifestation's bottomless power was raised to its limits it was unknown if one would be able to reach an SSS Rank power or even something superior. The spirit being sent outside, but on contrary using that spirit to reversely possess one's body. Nevertheless, making that paradoxical but stable possession complete was Chloe's objective.

However, just before she reached that level disaster fell. It was an unfortunate accident in many ways.

"But, reaching Chloe's level, who researched the Avatar abilities for a very long time and absorbed copious amounts of Aether, will still take a very long time. As such, in the immediate future we will be developing low-level abilities. Those which can be employed in an actual battle."

"Like what?"

“An Avatar’s abilities are against the common sense already formed among Awakens. Chloe was able to use brute force, flames and lighting without making use of her avatar. After all, one uses abilities related to the spirit whenever they make use of their avatar.”

Sorted among the superpowers of the highest grade, Psionic and the abilities related to Spirit were terrifying abilities capable of controlling and killing enemies using the mind without having to hit them. Chloe was the most powerful user able to use anything her mind wished for.

“I have not heard of that sort of person.”

Aran expressed her doubts.

“The activities we carried were a little secret. It is natural you don’t know.”

Those were stories only specific Hunters had heard of, there were many sensitive parts.

Chapter 25 - Our Manager The Landlord (3)

It was a story numerous Hunters and, obviously, civilians had never heard of. The two listened carefully, unable to understand how much weight the facts Kang-Joon spoke of carried.

“Therefore, Avatar is a double-edged power. If you master it you could be able to finish a task which takes a couple SS Rank, or higher, Awakens by yourself without even assimilating your Avatar.”

“But... I don't know what I should do.”

Although familiar with summoning the Avatar, using her powers while not summoning it wasn't any different from ordering her to grow wings. Kang-Joon then slowly explained.

“Before taking control of the Avatar does Ms. Gina fall asleep?”

“Yes.”

“That state is called Trance. In that state the consciousness, while separated from the body, wields a supernatural power.”

“Un.”

“What I will say is in fact really easy.”

Kang-Joon's explanation was indeed really simple.

“All you have to do is make it so only half of you falls in the Trance.”

“Only... Half?”

Aran tilted her head hearing it. Those words signified one thing. It was no different from becoming half asleep .

“But humans aren't dolphins.”

“That's true. One must be able to move around in that state, therefore, it is inherently difficult. You can wield your powers in that state, and if you become familiar with it you would become

able to use them while perfectly awake. If you can completely master this Half-Trance state you will be able to attain the reverse possession.”

Activating the ability half way, then making use of it. It was a fairly dangerous idea. That is to say one would fight while half asleep, and had to make full use of their power. If the balance was messed up one would immediately take over their Avatar or come back to their body, one of them unavoidably happening.

It was like trying to beat the 100m's record carrying a teacup expecting the tea wouldn't spill out. However, Choi Gina, seeing Kang-Joon's serious facial expression, couldn't muster any words to say.

It was the words of a colleague who died in the past with no others information left behind. And Gina herself didn't understand what they signified. However, Kang-Joon knew of one more detail about this.

“There is the slow and the fast way.”

“That... What are they?”

“The slow way is doing the usual. To get used to the Trance using the Half-Trance method. It will take a long time, probably needing a long period only to be able to grasp a feeling.”

“The fast way?”

Kang-Joon explained simply.

“Injecting OD-3 solution in your cervical vertebra.”

“Wait! What?”

“An Aether drug initially used when overdriving a Awaken abilities, originally injected in the blood vessels when injected in the cervical vertebra one's mind enters a period of extreme awareness. I heard from Chloe it was easy to enter the Half-Trance state during that time.”

Despite not even knowing what it was, Gina was already terrified.

“I-Isn’t that... Dangerous?”

“There are no risks involved. Don’t Awakens absorb Aether to strengthen their powers from the start? Although, well...”

Kang-Joon then spoke a little hesitant.

“It hurts a lot.”

Aran was already used to pain and showed no specific reactions to that words, while Gina’s face, who had no memories of living through something similar, turned dead white.

“It is not obligatory. And the OD-3 solution is a little expensive. A set is approximately US \$10,000. All I am doing is present the choices, so try giving it some thought.”

“T-Ten thousand?!”

Although it was known the majority of the items in the Hunter industry were expensive, \$10,000 was enough to bring Gina a wave of dizziness. That wasn’t the price of a single injection, one set of the injection’s solution was \$10,000. If you calculate per dose, each injection was about \$500.

“Of course, just so you know, the cost will be later deducted from the money Ms. Gina make...”

Gina panicked for multiple reasons, overwhelmed. The company had no obligation of paying the costs of developing their abilities. There was no other way, after all, that was nothing but a contract worth 3 years. Without being able to use the Avatar Gina was nothing but a common 20-something woman with ordinary physical strength, hunting being out of reach.

One had to develop a special ability somehow in order to work on the field. And her short lifespan could be replenished by absorbing Aether, because of those reasons this was a decision who involved

more than simply her life. In the end, Gina, because of the pressure of cash and the fear of facing the pain, decided to try it without the part of using the drugs.

Kang-Joon too didn't force her remembering Chloe crawling on the floor as if all her body's bones had melted after being injected with the OD-3 solution. Gina sat in a corner of the training hall motionless, starting to use her effort despite being completely clueless.

"Then Ms. Aran."

"Yes."

"Ms. Aran's personal battle level is outstanding in many ways. And, looking only at the body reinforcement's level it is equivalent to a low C Rank Knight."

That signified an excellent potential. As Knights strengthened their enhanced bodies as they absorbed Cubes, it meant that, even if the amount absorbed was small, their enhanced bodies would continuously get stronger as long as they repeated the process.

"As such, we will learn how to make proper use of that reinforcement through repeated training."

"Yes."

Aran was expressionless, but inside she was curious about what training she would be going through in the end. Her hands sweating slightly.

Kang-Joon carried something from an equipment box in one side of the training area. And Aran raised a slight frown seeing it. Kang-Joon was an ordinary Hunter, but he saw how many of the most varied ability users trained, directly assisting them. Now Choi Gina was in the middle of using Chloe's training method, while Maria's will be taught to Aran.

Taking off the cloth covering the items in a corner of the training area, something she was familiar with appeared.

“Isn’t that... a baseball shooter?”

“That is right. It is a pitching machine.”

“How would that...”

“You will practice activating the body reinforcement at the correct timing matching the moment it flies through the air. There is nothing like this to practice reaction speed and body reinforcement control.”

Maria, while repeatedly using and deactivating the body reinforcement within moments in front of the pitching machine, became familiar with which place and how much power one had to employ. Even Knights, who received a body modification, would quickly exhaust themselves if they kept using the body reinforcement all the time.

However, despite all of that, Kang-Joon would now be hitting a 18-year-old child with a baseball in front of a pitching machine. Even if you are used to pain, this was part of the instinctual fear of being hit.

“Doing it too fast will be a failure, and by doing it too late you will be hit by the ball. The goal, the exact timing, is to activate it when the distance between the body and the ball becomes about 30cm. Reinforcing other parts of your body is also a failure. You must predict the region the ball will hit and reinforce nothing but that area. We will gradually reduce the distance until we reach the last goal of 1cm. Although Ms. Aran possesses a C Rank body reinforcement now, if you can master this you could reach up to B-efficiency.”

Aran instantly analyzed what she heard and her eyes brightened. Activating the body reinforcement as needed in the required regions. If that is achieved it would allow one to concentrate in a small area and use the reinforcement factor with more efficiency. It is a method where simply through the reinforcement control one could employ power stronger than their original ability.

Aran actually received a similar lesson at the Temple, so she knew Kang-Joon's method would indeed display results.

Kang-Joon then added a few more words.

“If you master doing it with the ball we can then start hitting you with a whip.”

“It seems I have to report you to the cops after all.”

Aran mercilessly walked in the door's direction in big strides.

“Waaaaaaaait!”

Kang-Joon broke out in cold sweat for a while trying to keep Aran in place.

A whip hit enemies in an instant breaking through the speed of sound, and its landing point is very hard to predict. As such, it was a training which couldn't be done without a Knight's reflexes which transcends a human being's. Using a hammer or another damaging weapon would be dangerous because of the recoil impact which would hit Kang-Joon, therefore, the whip was the most appropriate choice.

“Guoooo!”

Choi Gina was in the middle of grunting trying any way to finish the task which wasn't going well.

“...”

Seo Aran stood in front of the pitching machine waiting for it to be operated.

“Please give me your hand.”

“?”

“I must know if you are indeed reinforcing only the exact part the ball hit.”

Kang-Joon grasped her hand. In order to confirm at all times the

hands weren't being reinforced. He then activated the pitching machine using a control. Aran suddenly gritted her teeth.

-Clank, Clank, Clank, Clank

"I will take care of avoiding or blocking the ones in my direction, so Ms. Aran should focus in the incoming ball."

"Yes."

-Bang

The first baseball was launched by the pitching machine.

-Pak!

And, together with a light sound, Aran was hit directly in the abdomen. Kang-Joon realized Aran didn't lose control of her body strengthening as the hand he was holding was soft. And was honestly impressed.

"Oh, you blocked it well from the start."

Even though Aran raised a slight frown she didn't cry out in pain.

The ball was fired once again, and

-Pak!

sounds rang. Kang-Joon realized something was wrong when the 'Pak!' sound rang for the fourth time.

If it was blocked by a reinforced body the noise of hitting the flesh wouldn't be 'Pak!', a 'Thump!' sound would emerge. Because with the body reinforcement activated the body was hardened to a tremendous degree.

In Maria's case she was extremely tense in the first time activating her entire upper body, however, Aran couldn't use reinforce her body at all.

"Concentrate!"

"I can't."

-Pak!

Aran didn't scream once while continuously receiving baseballs with her unprotected body. Kang-Joon caught a baseball flying at himself with his right hand wearing a glove then refocused in Aran giving her his continuous attention. She could endure pain a million times worse than this degree from the start.

The heart was running like crazy, therefore, it was obvious the reinforcement wouldn't happen. Nevertheless, the person concerned, the one disrupting her concentration, was unaware grasping her right hand firmly all the while scolding and telling her to concentrate.

Being hit for a long while, Aran was able to activate the body reinforcement at last.

-Thump!

The baseball hit Aran's shoulder and bounced off.

-Pak!

“Kyaaa!”

Then hit Choi Gina, who was meditating pitifully in the corner, straight in the head. Gina, who was seated, collapsed sideways with a thud.

“I-It hurts...”

And at the same time, the magical girl, Acacia, jumped out from Choi Gina's body rolling in the floor. It was an odd scene to fall in Trance rather than awakening from it.

Aran was still reinforcing the whole body completely lost, unable to turn it off.

It was a mess in various ways.

Chapter 26 - Does Red Also Runs Through A Blue Heart? (1)

Aran managed to subdue her excitement and initiated her training calmly after about a week had elapsed. Choi Gina was instructed to train in the room in order to concentrate in a quiet place. And Aran too needed that much extra concentration whenever initiating her training, carrying deep blue bruises in her entire body when the daily training was finished.

Although a Knight's self-healing was on the fast side, it wasn't to the level of quick-regeneration taking a full day if one was seriously injured.

In addition, because of a mistake with a hit directed at her face Seo Aran sported a puffy bluish eye. Knights were able to avoid fatal injuries because of their strengthened bodies without necessarily reinforcing it, an ordinary person in this situation would carry hidden injuries or would already have been sent to the hospital.

"This might be a little dangerous... Should we do a different training?"

Kang-Joon proposed not wanting Seo Aran to be seriously injured. However, Aran shook her head.

"No, I would like to continue."

She was burning with fighting-spirit. Aran held Kang-Joon's hand tightly and glared sharply at the pitching machine.

Jiwon,

that was the child's name. The child had already forgotten its real name, and no one addressed it by such, the only impression remaining of it being the vague word 'Jiwon' (TL.: Support/Aid).

The child didn't know if it had remembered something, and didn't know if it had once know something. The present was always more important than worrying over the past. The child changed constantly, to the point it couldn't even remember yesterday's nutritional supplements bitter taste.

The child couldn't even know whether it was a man or woman.

The body was constantly reconstructed, its original shape forgotten, now just having a person's appearance — nothing but a cover — being something fundamentally very different. The child had undergone cruel experiments to the point of being unable to recall anything, with no knowledge regarding its past.

A small height of 140-something tall, long and light brown bleached hair, and a slim body, but without genital or nipples. The child body had evolved in the form best suited for survival. In that process organs — including the reproductive organs — disappeared.

Speaking simply, the child was now 'genderless'.

Of course, as always, few people addressed it as they did a person.

Mutant (Korean), monster, chimera, repulsive product of inhumane experiments,

and,

Mutant.

Jiwon was seating motionless inside an enclosed space behind a reinforced glass, waiting for the next test.

Jiwon was now deep underground in a closed construction site in Hwaseong, Gyeonggi Province, inside a Mutant Pot.

And, opposite to Jiwon was a different child. While opposite to them on both sides stood different children, the same pattern repeating. In this corridor, like monkeys in a laboratory, numerous children stood lined in a row.

Generally it is difficult to name one precise thing about what makes a Mutant. Becoming genderless in the middle of an experiment, becoming both, dying, adapting perfectly to the mutation factors, failing the reconstruction and disappear melting in a pulp were all possible outcomes.

However, the undeniable truth was all the children in the lab, whether they adapt to the modification factor or fail, would undoubtedly die in the end.

What this sort of illegal Mutant Pot needed wasn't a 'new Mutant species' but 'the method to make a new Mutant species'. As such those who failed were discarded, while those who were successful were discarded after having enough success data extracted. On contrary, failures were able to die sooner and could be considered lucky. That success data was sold to huge pharmaceutical companies or Mutant schools overseas secretly, by a very large sum. Of course, this Mutant Pot possessed very outstanding facilities and special details when compared with other places, but Jiwon didn't have the knowledge to be able to recognize such things.

It was a time where the humans' rights charter was thrown in the dumpster. People were killed by monsters, and the monster was killed thanks to numerous sacrifices, again and again as if mankind's history was so.

People died.

The orphans of those disasters who failed to be assigned to proper care facilities were sold to illegal Pots like this through connection with brokers . Although it wasn't a time where orphans were overflowing, it was a period where they frequently appeared in bulks. Orphans were imported from places with poor public order like China and some nations in south-east Asia.

Growing children were very good materials for Mutant experiments.

If the places where those cruel illegal acts took place were caught by the regulation it would be difficult to evade the death sentence. However, despite all of that, if it was not for these illegal proceedings and human experiments which were no different from murder, it isn't an exaggeration to say there would be no mutants now.

After all,

Knights, the most versatile and remarkable Mutant, was one of the Mutant procedures created by a mad scientist.

People created different conspiracy theories everyday, saying big shots, politicians, large companies, and international pharmaceutical enterprises were hiding illegal Pots in their basement. However, nothing was ever revealed. Experiments were still carried, innocent children continued being experimented on forced to swallow drugs, having their free wills ignored.

There were a total of 56 specimens including Jiwon on Hwaseong's Pot, and although most of the children were Korean there were many imported from overseas. All of them started the experiment on the same day. A total of 11 died in the middle of the mutagenesis process which raised the regenerative power to the extreme, 5 couldn't endure the drugs and died from shock, another 3 skin became blue and melted like mush dying, and the remaining 3 didn't have their flesh but bones melted living for about 30 minutes like a mollusk until dying.

Although the rest didn't die, many children thought it would be good if they had, therefore, all of their mouths were physically gagged.

The first sense Jiwon forgot was that of weirdness. It is was so from the moment he saw a person changing in something like an octopus. He though THAT was strange, it would be difficult to find other words for it.

Jiwon didn't blink an eye as the doctors injected it with drugs to

the point of torture just thinking ‘this must be how dying feels like.’ It reviewed it as such.

However, its sense of pain wasn’t dead. However, although Jiwon could still feel pain, pain wasn’t a hindrance anymore.

Even though it felt pain, it wasn’t able to recall anything with it.

The Mutant procedures they were going through was already a verified procedure. As such even though practicing it was illegal, the procedure process itself was already a method used in many official Mutant Pots. It was just they were thrusting the syringe needles at anyone not knowing their aptitudes and the children could do nothing but bear the brunt of it.

The procedure they were being subjected to was the base of the basic procedure ‘regenerative power maximization and immunity strengthening’, in other words, the procedure initiated before the Knights’s basic procedure.

However, in this case wounds recovered in less than 3 seconds surpassing the super regenerative procedure slightly. The personnel of this illegal Pot possessed a lot of technical data.

Jiwon was once more injected with many immunity enhancers, as well as mixtures of Aether and Cubes without stop, and now, when they approached the main stage of their experiment, the survivors among the specimens didn’t even amount to 20 people.

Except for violence, all the researchers as well doctors and scientist here were veterans.

On the day of the long-anticipated experiment, the Pot’s chief-director would perform the initiated surgery process himself. One of from the individuals on the outermost layer, was led out by the researchers, and unlike the ordinary times where they would at least return, never came back. However, Jiwon paid it no mind.

Jiwon forgot most of its feelings, and, as such, laughed. There was no one but Jiwon who smiled in this sealed underground

space. Neither specimens or researchers would carelessly babble about smiling. And, the laughing Jiwon didn't receive any particular interest. The Mutants that went crazy during the experiment process were dime a dozen and were nothing special.

Jiwon was smiling when it was led by the researchers and placed in the cold operation table.

The chief Director wearing a white mask lifted a circular bead with his wrist and looked down on Jiwon.

"I have looked forward for this time."

There were already many splashes of red blood on his surgical garment, and numerous dead specimens were thrown about while some sort of deep blue liquid dribbled. The personnel who didn't participate in the surgery were carrying the dead specimens, placing them on huge thrash bags. However, Jiwon paid it no mind.

If you die you die, and if you live you live. As it always have being so far. Dying and living were never under Jiwon's control.

"Once you get the proper response you can start the project in earnest."

The chief director received the same briefing from the staff on stand-by as he did with the dozen of corpses lying around. Jiwon was estimated as the individual with the best adaptability among the specimens. The chief director never shared a talk with the specimens.

However, he met Jiwon eyes and spoke.

"Specimen G-10."

"..."

"I hope you can endure it well. Administer GD-10."

"Yes."

A mutant-specific special-drug used increase regeneration to the

peak was administered, and Jiwon observed its own chest being open with its eyes wide open. Jiwon didn't twitch a single finger enduring the pain. It was already too accustomed to be sick of that much. Jiwon only thought of how good dying would be, not rising again and being thrown in those garbage bags like those corpses.

The chief director took something out from a special case. There was a light blue shine on it.

Jiwon had verified with its own eyes how some of its own organs were formed, as such it knew what that was. The blue color was a little different but...

That was a heart.

The chief-Director got rid of specimen G-1's heart, and pushed the terrifying blue heart with size appropriate to a child in Jiwon's chest. A bypass surgery wasn't needed. Because of the extremely increased regenerative power, the open rib-cage swallowed the blue heart while slowly closing.

Soon, Specimen G-1 was medicated with dozens of types of reinforcement drugs including numerous stimulants. Being neither a girl or boy, it opened its eyes wide twisting its body fiercely feeling the foreign feeling.

"Ugh! Agh! Haa!"

-BaDump! BaDump! BaDump!

The officials kept track of the changes happening in the specimen G-1 in real-time.

In a Pot in Hwaseong a surgery where a Mutant who was once human had a monster heart, in other words a Core, inserted in place of its real heart was completed.

"Agh! Ugh! Ugh!"

From G-1's body, from which excretory organs had already disappeared, blue and red liquid flowed down without stopping

like sweat and urine.

-Badump! Badump!

Every one was paying attention to the changes instead of the pain the child was feeling. And, despite the clear agonizing pain it was subjected to...

“He, Heugh! He! Hehe!”

G-1 was laughing.

“Mr. Kang-Joon, I heard an illegal Mutant Pot was discovered in Hwaseong.”

Seol Yeong left behind the personnel who were training in Kang-Joon’s apartment building, and talked with him in the apartment room.

“Ah... Were those involved arrested?”

“All of them died!”

“Hm... Well, that isn’t something uncommon.”

Once an illegal specimen obtained power out of the norm killing the people involved in the experiment was almost no different from a fixed process. Of course, there were many more cases in which it didn’t come to that, and the scientists too were devising safety-measures against it.

However, it wasn’t as if one could stop a disaster just by preparing for it, if a mutant unlocked power beyond the S Rank any of them would smash all restraints and fortified gates mercilessly. The discovered illegal Pots were either uncovered by the police, smashed by the specimens, or both at once, while the latter case was extremely rare.

“Therefore, an emergence hunting order was issued with a presidential decree.”

It wasn't something unexpected so Kang-Joon nodded his head. The Pot was destroyed due to the result of its illegal procedures. In other words, that runaway Mutant, although because of personal revenge, had killed people in the end, and was, therefore, a dangerous monster.

As such, it was urgent to hunt or capture it before additional harm came into being, and currently every management's Teams and police force were blocking Hwaseong. As the Mutant's strength was unknown the cooperation of Hunters was indispensable.

"I have not done much in the meantime, but despite that the Hunter Team's registration was already completed."

Seol Yeong explained slowly.

"Therefore, we also have the right to be able to approach that case."

There was a reason Seol Yeong brought out those words, the Hunter Team was officially registered, so that is to say Hero Management too could jump into that matter.

"I don't want to impose, and it is okay if you decide it is better not to go. Nevertheless, bringing it up was better than not knowing after all. I am leaving the choice on Mr. Kang-Joon's hands."

The team members were two novices and were still inexperienced, and a Mutant hunt promised, in the end, a clash against humans. If things go awry one might have to kill someone. Of course, the imperial decree itself was a hunt, therefore, any dangerous element had to be eliminated quickly. As such, during a time of emergency there wouldn't be a big problem even if the Mutant they were chasing after was killed.

If an order of capture was issued it meant the uncontrollable Mutant could bring very big damages. Although Seo Aran could be

employed in a real job right now, Choi Gina's case was different. The Half-Trance state was not even tried not to say complete. Of course, she could overpower the SS Rank at any moment if she used the Avatar, but that itself was a not very desirable method.

“If you decide to go, I will get in touch with all the officials involved. We will leave this incident to the police and military, it is an event led by the government after all, so our participation is enough.”

Seol Yeong's idea was getting the minimum benefits. The state held in its hands the right to assign the regions whenever an incident was involved. Therefore, the only trouble necessary was having to bend down to all the government had to say.

Following that sort of emergency order would work as a form of building up qualification for Hero Management. As Such, Seol Yeong was suggesting the Hunter Team would only be touring around there and that it wouldn't be a bad thing to try going once.

As a business with absolutely no risk, there was no reason to worry.

Chapter 27 - Does Red Also Runs Through a Blue Heart? (2)

Most of all, Seol Yeong indicated her intention of entrusting them the decision. She acknowledged Kang-Joon possessed the initiative of the Hunter Team itself.

“I would like to ask the Team members’ opinion.”

“Okay.”

Choi Gina and Seo Aran, who were in the middle of training, nodded their heads. Numerous Hunter Teams were dispatched, and the truth was the military and police forces were fully mobilized. There were very few risks, and the minimum benefits were guaranteed. It was a task many would take part in and they had to increase the Hunter Team value itself, it was always a good thing to accumulate one more qualification.

However, Choi Gina felt compassion for the specimen itself, while Seo Aran nodded her head as she couldn’t know whether the harm to the civilians would increase. After all, no further damage would happen if the specimen was captured or killed as soon as possible.

“Then get ready and prepare to depart immediately.”

“Collect the equipment in the Hunter’s Bank on the way.”

Seol Yeong passed the security-Card, and Kang-Joon, after receiving it, went to open his own safe taking the equipment he would need. The others, including Seol Yeong, became a little nervous seeing Kang-Joon well armed appearance.

“One must always be prepared to face the unknown.”

Despite saying so Kang-Joon thought this much preparation was, in fact, lacking. Seo Aran, who had seen the sight of Kang-Joon fully armed at that time, knew that this was indeed light armor.

“Let’s go.”

The three boarded a big van of the company and departed immediately after that, all while Seol Yeong kept stressing it was all meant to be nothing more than a participation for now. Everyone’s state was a little tense since they wouldn’t be hunting monsters in their first mission but a person.

“There is no need to be nervous. I am going there in order to build experience, I am not going there to hunt.”

After all, Choi Gina’s current combat power was close to zero, confronting the runaway Mutant was perhaps no different from suicide. The enemy’s capabilities was assumed to be among the best for now closing on the S Rank. Most of all, Mutants and Awakens displayed terrifying power when cornered. An ability user who ignored their life and were desperate were able to make dozens of Hunters step back.

Methods to capture monsters as well as methods of fighting with ability users who had lost their reason were taught in the Knight Temple. And as such, Seo Aran, even if not as calm as Kang-Joon, kept her nervousness in check quite well.

For the time being, considering the situation, it was decided only Seo Aran would carry an Aether Sword. As there was no use giving one to Choi Gina, who didn’t know how to use a weapon, the equipment that were withdrawn for now were two Armour Coats, two Shield Bracelets, and one Aether Sword.

After going in the Hunter’s Bank and receiving them, Seo Aran inspected the equipment teaching Choi Gina who didn’t know how to use them. Armour Coat was a type of long coat who went up to one’s thighs, and was able to automatically heat or cool when worn regardless of the season.

“Oh, Oh. Did these clothes just shrink themselves?”

An A Class Armour Coat produced by Crescent Moon that

weren't defective like the last. Which shrank or stretched itself to fit correctly to the wearer body, had temperature control and was able to fend off an anti-tank artillery if their force field was deployed to the maximum.

“It includes a brain-wave sensing function. It picks your thoughts, therefore, you can easily activate and deactivate it, or adjust its strength.”

Seo Aran kindly explained, and Gina listened carefully to her explanation like a well-behaved student. Seo Aran quickly recognized the equipment given to her was of the finest quality. Despite not having interacted with such items many times she knew that were many high-tech devices integrated on it.

“Isn't Hero Management a small company?”

“There are a few circumstances in there. That is the equipment everyone will be using for now.”

In fact, there was no newcomer Hunters anywhere else who received that sort of treatment. There was no one among the graduates like Aran who prepared to an actual battle receiving training from a professional Hunter, and was handed A-Class equipment immediately after contracting someone. Even though, of course, that was lent and not given.

Being given top quality equipment like a Shield Bracelet was something Seo Aran couldn't even have imagined.

In various ways, coming to Hero Management wasn't a regretful choice.

Kang-Joon's party arrived in Hwaseong the night of that day. As the place the frightful accident occurred Hwaseong's whole area was completely blocked by soldiers, and they soon reached the checkpoint.

“I hope you can cooperate for moment. Please present your ID.”

“We have come from Hero Management.”

“Ah, yes. Hero Management.”

The soldier verified the ID card, and after inquiring the management and Hunter Team he carefully checked the people on board.

Not even one ant could escape from Hwaseong now not to say someone who didn't prove his identity, everything was checked from the trunk to each single item in the cargo compartment.

“All checked. The headquarters is currently overcrowded so the desk in charge of the Hunter Teams is arranged in the city hall. You might want to take a look and get some information of the incident in that place.”

“Yes. Thank you for the hard work.”

Receiving the soldier's salute Kang-Joon took the van slipping inside Hwaseong nimbly.

“It still have not being caught... is it hiding somewhere?”

Choi Gina gazed at the dim nightly road and asked.

“I don't know.”

Kang-Joon wasn't convinced of anything yet.

It was evident Hwaseong's lodgings would be full thanks to the managements' personnel and the military's officials so Kang-Joon had given up on trying to grasp one from the start.

“Washing, sleeping, and eating — Let's settle them all in the car for now.”

The van was for that sort of use from the start, therefore, nobody raised a complaint. There were other measures to the bath situation such as going to a bathhouse or use the faucet from the park's restroom. While meals were substituted by burgers. Hwaseong's atmosphere was uneasy. No one went outside, and a siren rang regularly together with a warning broadcast.

-eeeeeeeng!

[A small part of Hwaseong city is currently occupied by the military. It is possible a dangerous Mutant is now hiding on Hwaseong city. All citizens are encouraged to refrain from outdoor activities, and to cooperate with the request from the military as well as Hunters.]

“This announcement is hitting them to flee.”

Kang-Joon clicked his tongue. However, it might be better to confine the people at home than create useless civilian casualties.

Hwaseong’s city hall’s interior had soldiers in standby as well as managements’ Hunter Teams. In there managers were better suited to obtain information of the incident’s than the Hunters.

“Are there still no sightings information yet?”

“How was the operational area readjusted now?”

“Quick, Please!”

The Hunter Teams were running on the field, and the managers were here learning the military tactics and information, conveying them through the phone. In many ways, if the Hunter Teams were working hard moving around, the managers were working hard planning how they would do it. As a presidential’s decree emergency operation, if one made a contribution to the incident they would receive the president’s commendation, be rewarded an award and would, of course, also receive the media’s attention.

It wasn’t a lot money, but it was an opportunity worth more than money in many ways. The Hunters earned praise and reputation, the managers made the company a contribution, and the management’s earned the president’s citation to the office, suddenly increasing the company advertising a level.

‘I will receive the president’s commendation solving Hwaseong’s Mutant incident!’

There was clamor everywhere and each single street was overturned, everyone was in the middle of a competition with

their eyes aflame.

Kang-Joon left the team members in the van and entered the chaotic Hwaseong's city hall. Journalists too were already forming a wall inside. Kang-Joon, who had to go through the gaps between the crowd of people and the military personnel who was being bombarded by questions, hesitated for a moment.

And, in this juncture, the connections Seol Yeong created for him showed their worth.

“Oh, isn't this Mr. Kang-Joon?”

It was Blue Order Agency's Team Leader Choi Jeon-Wun. He too was dispatched to this scene and recognized Kang-Joon from his direction in the lobby, approaching to greet him first.

“Ah, Hello. Team Leader Mr. Choi.”

“It's been a long while, right? Didn't you manage to hook-in a Templar aspirant at that time?”

“Haha, I just decided to give it a try and got lucky.”

“Mr. Kang-Joon rumors are wide-spread. Someone who in the end managed to convince Seo Aran, who was a person who wouldn't raise an eyebrow or blink regardless of how high the conditions were raised, using mysterious ways. That is not a full-time manager but a professional Head Hunter instead, right?”

“Haha...”

“In any case, Mr. Kang-Joon. Your reason to have come here is evident...”

He looked at the crowded city hall's lobby interior and clicked his tongue.

“What do you think, I tell you what I have found out of the situation so far, so I can learn a few of those incredible methods?”

“No, it doesn't have anything special...”

“Haha, this is one expensive fellow.”

He didn't actually have any sort of outstanding method like the other side wanted to know, so it was a trade Kang-Joon didn't have to pay for.

“It's just, we were originally sort of acquaintances.”

Kang-Joon replied vaguely like that, and, although it was a half-assed made-up lie, it was surprisingly true. Kang-Joon, unaware he had spoken the truth, faced Team Leader Choi's gentle gaze shamelessly.

“Ohh, so it was like that. What I know is also nothing great.”

Team Leader Choi led Kang-Joon outside the city hall and pulled a cigarette, slowly explaining about the incident.

“That bastard is probably in Hwaseong's downtown. As long as that bastard didn't board a car and escaped being arrested is just matter of time. I can see him heading in Suwon's direction right now... In that case everyone here is running in circles.”

Once they crossed in a big city finding an Mutant in its right state of mind with some time elapsed was something close to impossible. The fact it hadn't being detected even once could until now allowed him to think of two kind of possibilities. Kang-Joon slowly arranged his thoughts.

1. It coincidentally moved through places without CCTV.
2. It already possessed ordinary clothes and had hidden himself among people.

If it was like that it signified he hadn't lost his senses. If the Mutant was able to think normally the dangerous excuse was no more. However, the research facility was destroyed and all the personnel inside killed.

“Any possibility we could go to the crime scene?”

“Naturally the inside is already interdicted, but I took some

pictures. Ugh, that was a gruesome sight. Should I show you?”

“Please.”

Team Leader Choi generously showed Kang-Joon a picture of the incident’s scene he had captured. Even though Team Leader Choi seemed to dislike the view, Kang-Joon looked at the picture calmly.

‘This... It’s similar to body reinforcement, its scope a little wider.’

The corpse had everything above his shoulders removed, appearing as if a huge monster had taken a bite out of it, although identifying a Mutant without seem it directly was a very dangerous action, it had to be judged using the limited information for now.

The underground research facility’s walls had wide caved-in parts like it was stricken by a huge super-large hammer. Kang-Joon continuously inferred about what sort of ability could make such marks and traces.

“Did what sort of experiment they were in the middle of get revealed?”

“You see, investigation was indeed carried inside, however, the Mutant hunt was urgent so everyone there is now dealing with it.”

“Ah, yes... So it’s like that.”

Kang-Joon paid more attention to the experiment instruments scattered around than the dead bodies in the crime’s scene. Even though there were no special marks engraved anywhere, the Pot decoration was overly white, and there was an unidentified blue liquid on the floor.

Seeing this sort of design in a Pot was something Kang-Joon had a few memories of.

In addition, the blue liquid flowing in the floor was something crucial.

‘Are they Acula remnants? Did those bastards survive?’

It was the remains of a group of mad scientists supposed to be arrested in one fell swoop a long time ago. He bit his lips slightly showing a deep impression.

“Did you figure something out?”

“No... This is... pretty disgusting.”

Kang-Joon turned his head as if couldn't look at it. And Team Leader Choi gave him a bashful smile as if he understood him, tapping on Kang-Joon shoulder with a thump.

“Thank you, Team Leader Mr. Choi.”

Despite not receiving anything valuable in return he still kindly spoke of all he knew, therefore, Kang-Joon was thankful to Team Leader Choi. If Seol Yeong hadn't introduced them he would be now like those people, having no choice but looking for a spot in the crowd going through hell just to learn a little bit more.

“If you find out something Mr. Kang-Joon must tell me about it.”

“All right. I will definitely let you know.”

Kang-Joon smiled and bid farewell to Team Leader Choi. Team Leader Choi decided to return to the city hall again and wait for new information. Kang-Joon hit the cellphone and sent a message to Maria.

[Maria, I would like you to convey Brad some words.]

With no reply Kang-Joon continued messaging.

[Acula's remnants were operating in an underground laboratory near Hwaseong City in Gyeonggi province, Korea, vicinity. It is destroyed now and I am not sure how much information remained.]

[I don't know much about how well established Acula is, but, as remnants still remains, it should mean it is still active.]

Kang-Joon wasn't sure he wanted to finish despite having already written his words, hesitating for a moment when sending the message.

[One of the Specimens broke loose, and destroyed the laboratory completely. I have seen pictures of the laboratory's scene, so it is probable that bastards' experiments objective is still the same. And the specimen said to have escaped its none other than the rumored complete product. Even though it's probably not under their control one thing is certain.]

Kang-Joon then sent a last message, like a warning.

[Those bastards completed BlueHeart.]

Kang-Joon had never imagined he would be followed by ghosts of the past like this.

Chapter 28 - Does Red Also Runs Through A Blue Heart? (3)

[I will chase after BlueHeart. Please tell all these facts to Brad, and help Union investigate about this incident. Although I could contact them directly... I am sorry for asking for favors over and over.]

After putting his cellphone in his pocket, Kang-Joon walked to the van and opened the door. Inside, the tired Choi Gina was asleep, while Seo Aran stared at Kang-Joon with alert eyes.

“This, it seems we might be able to catch it.”

“Yes?”

“Yeash?”

Choi Gina also raised her head hearing the sudden noise. Saliva was already dropping from her chin. Kang-Joon set the car moving, heading somewhere else.

“Where are we going?”

“Suwon’s Monitoring Station.”

Core, Dungeons, as well as spacial anomalies were basically all emitting different wavelengths, and monitoring stations were responsible for measuring the intensity and type of those waves, informing others should any abnormality be detected. Each region’s monitoring station was a very important national facility and were not a place any person could enter.

In the past, due to a broken detector Jecheon was subject of a catastrophe. Just from that, the monitoring stations’ importance didn’t need to be emphasized twice.

As such, it wasn’t surprising to be blocked on the entrance.

“This is a military facility. Civilian vehicles can not enter.”

The soldier watching over the entrance knocked on the window of the van Kang-Joon had parked while speaking. And Kang-Joon took out his ID and employee card, speaking.

“I have come to get a little cooperation from the facility in relation to the search operation happening in Hwaseong at the moment. I am from Hero Management, and the two behind are Hunters.”

“Ah... Yes, can you wait just a moment?”

The soldier went to guard post for a moment to call his superior before returning again.

“My superiors received no notifications of such matters.”

Kang-Joon worried for a moment. He expected they would have opened once they heard of the operation, however, it seemed the monitoring station wouldn't open their doors so easily. What should he do... After hesitating for a moment Kang-Joon opened his mouth once again.

“There is a method capable of locating the runaway Mutant.”

Naturally, this had become a serious problem now, so everyone knew the news regarding the runaway Mutant. At that words the guard complexion hardened.

“And that method has to make use of the monitoring station's equipment. I can not tell you the details. Besides that, I also know a method to capture it. If we were to be delayed here and civilian casualties occurs I will have to ask Suwon's Monitoring Station to shoulder the responsibility later on.”

“What, that...”

“Please convey this to the one responsible swiftly.”

Although it was no different from half a threat the terrified guard complexion paled and returned to his sentry post, once again

hitting the phone repeatedly. Then he kept muttering as if he was apprehensive. Gina watched the scene of Kang-Joon persuading the guard using reasonable words with her mouth wide open.

Soon, the figure of a single soldier sporting a badge of Lieutenant Colonel rank rushing from the front gate appeared. The guard made a powerful salute, and Kang-joon watched that person without getting off the car, just poking his head out stealthily.

“You, did you say ‘management official’?”

“Yes.”

“This is a zone where all civilian access is prohibited. A place where, if things go out of control, an order of releasing fire against a civilian can be issued. I would have know if this was the town playground!”

Although he had spoken nicely upon arriving the Lieutenant Colonel’s anger was boiling yelling with a shriek. It was clear to see that a management official talking this and that about responsibility had ignited his anger. As those words stopped, rather than Kang-Joon, it was Gina and Aran on the back seat that were tense.

“Then we can’t go in?”

“Not unless you bring the official document for cooperation! Get the officials instructions in the operation headquarters and pick up a piece of paper! Nowadays, managements are thinking they are cops and soldiers!”

“In that case I will have to go to Ansan’s Monitoring Station.”

The Monitoring Station in Suwon’s wasn’t the only who could also cover Hwaseong, Ansan’s Monitoring Station could too. Kang-Joon had only came here because it was closer.

“Whether you go or n-”

“And if any person is harmed while we are heading to Ansan it

will be Mr. General responsibility.”

“What kind of rubbish you are talking about...”

“If we had to head for Ansan to receive cooperation, and the runaway Mutant was to cause people harm in the meantime, wouldn’t that be because Suwon’s Monitoring Station refused to cooperate? Tell me. Now, Mr. General is aware of how much damage your lack of cooperation can bring during that time...”

Soldiers were vulnerable to responsibility. And Kang-Joon knew it well. Kang-Joon slowly recited the two magic words.

“Will you take responsibility?”

At that words the Lieutenant colonel chief froze. Because of a single responsibility a soldier would receive punishment and would have to take off their uniform. It was always better to never create a situation one had to take responsibility for. Those were two magic words that captivated all soldiers.

Kang-Joon spoke one more time.

“Are you willing to take responsibility?”

“Ah, no... Why would that be my... responsibility?”

The lieutenant Colonel finally realized something on that situation was strange and began to use evasive words. Kang-Joon hardened his expression, and spoke with a very serious face.

“It should be evident that with the operation headquarters being troubled with so many matters at the moment I would be delayed by a very long time, therefore, I headed here directly. I was already aware this violates the proper procedures. However, we must make it clear where the responsibility lies.”

Kang-Joon words seemed intimidating and were not completely unreasonable. It was a simple situation where one had to make a choice and receive responsibility for it. However, the initiative in this war of nerves had already passed over to Kang-Joon. As the

Lieutenant General had said, a management was a business run by civilians and, as such, had no obligation to the citizens. However, to protect the people was a soldier's duty.

Kang-Joon was free of that obligation, while his counterpart wasn't. After hesitating for a moment, the Lieutenant Colonel spoke with a hard expression. As the person in charge of the area letting a few civilians in wasn't a big problem for him.

"You have a method able to locate it, are you certain of that?"

"Yes."

"If you cannot execute it you will surely have to account for this disturbance."

"We will be responsible for that."

"You will take responsibility?"

"Eh? Why would I take responsibility?"

Kang-Joon shook his employee Card.

"Every responsibility is on Hero Management."

Kang-Joon, regardless of the reason, had no intention of being the one responsible. Gina and Aran looked at that Kang-Joon and thought the same.

'Our manager seems to have a few personality problems...'

Nevertheless the monitoring station gates opened, and the three people aboard the van slowly went inside.

Although the Lieutenant Colonel was no different from a god to the soldiers, to Kang-Joon he was nothing but a middle-aged old man. Full cooperation was requested in the first place, so Kang-Joon explained why this operation was needed and how he planned to locate the Mutant.

The four had gotten off the cars and were now slowly making their way to the monitoring station's key area, the control room.

“The Mutant who is running away now is a very unique Mutant known as BlueHeart.”

“BlueHeart?”

“Yes, you know how Cores are obtained from monsters in a Core outbreak situation?”

“Isn’t that common sense?”

“That Cores, in simple terms, are the monsters’ heart.”

Core Energy is the generic term used for all the extracted and crystalized energy obtained from those. The blue Core held a considerable amount of very dense and simultaneously harmless energy.

“BlueHeart means a Mutant who had that heart — whose Core energy had yet to be extracted — transplanted in a human after their own heart was removed.”

At that words the accompanying Lieutenant Colonel and Gina were shocked, while Aran, who had went through that cruel Mutant operation, had a placid expression.

“Transplanting a monster’s heart in a person? Something crazy like that...”

“Numerous attempts at enhancing the Human species itself have always being continuously made. This, too, is just a single one among them.”

Acula was group of scientist who researched Mutant procedures, and had actually produced multiple results. Their ultimate goal, however, was combining the heart of a monster and a human’s, changing a human in a complete different existence.

Although during an Mutant procedure Core solutions were injected in a human and the body was remodeled, combining monsters and humans was a completely unknown territory. That was Acula’s group goal, and in that process a great amount of

people were illegally sacrificed.

Kang-Joon, who had experienced dealing with that group, knew that laboratory was remainder from Acula, and, knowing what their goal was, knew what he had to search for to capture their target.

In front of the control room a huge screen was displaying Suwon's monitoring station's jurisdiction area. At present, one D-Class Core and one F-Class Dungeon were active, while the dots indicating the deployed personnel was displayed together with a 'in action' label.

Choi Gina, who was entering a monitoring station for the first time, looked at the place preoccupiedly. Many personnel on duty were sitting in front of computers busy watching the screen, writing, or recording something.

Here 'slacking-off' was a forbidden word. And, naturally, the personnel on duty here were not common soldiers but non-commissioned officers and officers. If one was caught sleeping here there would be no disciplinary action, they would be sent to military trial immediately.

"Wow..."

Choi Gina looked at that well-ordered scene and felt a different kind of awe. While, despite also being her first time seeing such scene, Aran maintained a calm expression.

"I have no idea what you will do but feel free to start."

"We must use an energy scanner. Not a wavelength sensor."

When sensing anomalies what was detected wasn't the energy itself but the special wavelength that spread when the incident occurred. When searching for energy many problems would arise.

"Wouldn't there be too many variables?"

The Lieutenant Colonel's reaction was something Kang-Joon

expected. An Energy Scanner was able to detect Cubes, Aether, and Cores. However, that is to say all Cubes, Aether and Cores in a given Area. It was able to pick up the already crystalized energy, detecting Hunters, which frequently carried Aether as well as Cube devices, or stored Cores. Of course, underground laboratories couldn't be detected because of their wave isolating outer walls.

“Like I said before BlueHeart possesses the heart of a monster.”

The Lieutenant Colonel could understand what that meant. If they used the Energy scanner they could track the mutant possessing a blue heart.

“However, wouldn't Hunters also be detected at the same time? Core energy waves are also detected in Mutants.”

Mutants were those who had, basically, assimilated a Core, and as such the Core energy present in them could also be detected.

“There are many Hunters dispatched to the operation area. And Mutants too are present among them, if too many objects are detected there will be no meaning. Furthermore, if a wavelength filter isn't applied Cubes storages as well as Aether and Cubes safes will be marked...”

“It is easy to get rid of that.”

It was a very simple method.

“Hunters are basically wearing Aether swords and Armour Coat all the time, right?”

“That is indeed... Ah!”

Lieutenant Colonel grasped, at last, what they were supposed to do.

“First you have to locate all energy waves, then all you have to do is erase all variables emitting Aether and Core waves together. The runaway Mutant is escaping, it shouldn't have already obtained an Ether Sword neither an Armor Coat.”

It was a simple method. The escapee wasn't a professional Hunter but a runaway specimen. As such, all they had to do was discover an object moving while also emitting pure Core energy waves. Lieutenant Colonel nodded his head with a serious expression, calling out for an official in duty.

“Energy Scanner operating.”

The Energy Scanner was originally used during unsuppressed disasters, something almost useless at ordinary times. Used to track the rampaging monsters' position. The personnel on duty wondered what matter could be suddenly happening while obediently operating the scanner as the Lieutenant General's words commanded.

Soon, all detected Core, Aether, and Cube energy waves were on Screen.

The numerous light blue points emerging on top of the map in the screen signified each of those energy waves.

“Eliminate the areas including powerplants' and Cube storages' locations, as well as all readings below the S Rank from here.”

Kang-Joon spoke, and Lieutenant Colonel ordered an official in duty to do as it was said. Soon the number of points displayed on the screen diminished to thousands in a flash.

“And eliminate all values emitting Aether and Cube Energy waves together.”

The order was carried a short time later and the majority of the blue points marked in the map disappeared. Despite removing all the Core storages' locations, including the Core powerplants', some light blue points still remained. There were always people who stored Cores in their private safes as a method of investment. However, it was extremely uncommon for an individual to store Cores of such high-grade capable of emitting S Rank level energy waves, and even then all were fixed in place unmoving.

There was more than a single S Rank Core energy wave, however, just one among them was moving. Kang-Joon observed the energy wave moving in the scanner and grasped its position. On contrary, the Lieutenant Colonel, the one in charge of operating the scanner, was staring at that scene with his mouth wide open.

Kang-Joon only said a few words briefly.

“It already crossed the defensive line.”

The runaway Mutant was already near Byeong-Jeom Station.

Chapter 29 - Does Red Also Run Through A Blue Heart?(4)

“I-Is that really the runaway Mutant?”

The personnel on duty understood what they themselves had found and were all astonished.

“Ms. Aran, you are going together with me.”

“Yes.”

“Ms. Gina will remain here in order to continuously report its position.”

“Ah, Yes!”

“W-Wait a second. Who... Who are you after all?”

Seeing Kang-Joon’s intention of rushing out immediately the Lieutenant General asked.

“How do you know how to use the energy scanners so well like that, and how can you locate it so easily like this? What sort of person can do that?”

Although there still many uncertain points, the General was certain that moving light blue point was indeed the genuine runaway Mutant. There were very few Mutants that could produce Core energy waves surpassing the S Rank, and all the conditions Kang-Joon had spoken of were met as he said they would. Now all they had to do was go and catch it. It was even more surprising to know not even the engineers who handled the Energy Scanner knew what to consider and what variables they had to eliminate in order to pinpoint a target like this.

Forget simply shouldering the responsibility, working together with civilians to track the runaway Mutant, it was clear he would have a successful career ahead of him.

Using common words this was no different from an once-in-lifetime encounter. Kang-Joon looked at him and handed a business card.

“Hero Management’s affiliated manager, Choi Kang-Joon.”

It wasn’t a bad thing to get to know a military official, rather, there would be many benefits.

The two went out of the control room. While Choi Gina remained to do the briefing, standing still in the situation room. The personnel in duty and, of course, the Lieutenant General were all staring at her, while he asked.

“Manager...? Is he really a manager?”

“Well...”

Choi Gina couldn’t help laughing foolishly with a slight slack expression.

“Yes.”

In any case, it wasn’t a lie.

Kang-Joon had left Choi Gina and came because starting now it was unknown whether a battle would occur. Seo Aran was able to do one person’s share, and despite being a newbie was a Knight with superb talent. Furthermore, she possessed Class equipment. Aran was seated in the passenger seat inspecting the equipment and asked.

“Are you going to kill it?”

Aran couldn’t ask that question as they hurried over in the van. Aran was the only one aware of Kang-Joon’s ‘genuine’ skills in Hero Management. Therefore, she knew that if Kang-Joon wished to kill that runaway Mutant he could do it without much effort.

An official hunting order was issued, so even if that Mutant was to die there would be no repercussions.

Kang-Joon, instead of replying Aran, asked a different question.

“If you were to make a Team with that runaway Mutant, what would Ms. Aran’s thoughts be?”

Kang-Joon’s question wasn’t any different from an answer itself, answering many things at once. Aran looked ahead expressionless, replying.

“As long they don’t become a hindrance, I don’t care who they are.”

Kang-Joon had no thoughts about hunting the Mutant.

That was the finished product of Acula organization’s experiments on living beings. Regardless of what their actions were and the consequences of the heinous experiments they carried the result itself had no relation with their crimes. The subject was nothing but the subject, it didn’t have any form of guilt.

Although the BlueHeart project was an act carried by a bunch of madmen, it didn’t change the fact that if it is the result itself, it was an Mutant worth securing first.

However, Mutants who had escaped from that sort of situation generally possessed unstable minds, and Kang-Joon’s mood as they proceeded wasn’t as light as his reply to Aran.

The most troublesome thing was finding a parking lot in Byeong-Jeom station’s vicinity, but Kang-Joon simply lined the car on the shoulder after switching on the emergency lights and got off the car. The hour was already deep at night. Aran wore the Armour Coat while inspecting the equipment one last time, doing a last-minute check.

“Split and search?”

“No, act together with me.”

Kang-Joon’s equipped equipment consisted only of an Aether Blaster, Aether Sword, and a Shield Bracelet, not extending to an Armour Coat.

“Is it okay to not even wear a Coat?”

“With this thing it will be enough.”

Shield Bracelets basically possessed a weaker force field defense level because of size restrictions. However, Kang-Joon carried the most advanced equipment, and that Shield Bracelet possessed an S Rank force field.

Just that alone was enough to be able to conquer an A Rank Dungeon.

Kang-Joon took out the Blaster and inspected its chamber. It carried a total of six shots,

and there was no such thing as a blank.

He then contacted Choi Gina who was in the control room.

“Ms. Gina, what is the target’s position?”

[It’s now north from Byeong-Jeom station... Ah, yes. Yes. Ah really? Thank you.]

“What for?”

[Mr. General will transmit you its GPS location.]

“Great.”

With the general permission, the security code was transmitted to Kang-Joon’s phone not long after, and with the GPS turned on the light blue dot marking the target’s position was soon displayed. Then the General, who had received the cellphone from Gina, informed Kang-Joon.

[Military units are secretly being deployed to the relevant places. The top priority is making sure there is no civilian casualties, and I hope you can refrain from unnecessary engagements.]

He was a soldier, and had the obligation of reporting the information he found to his superiors. Kang-Joon had no intention of criticizing him as he had postponed it until he arrived. On

contrary, Kang-Joon was the one who had to cooperate with the military.

“I get it. What is the expected arrival time?”

[Approximately 10 minutes.]

In any case, he too was part of the personnel participating in the operation, and was granted a degree of autonomy in it. As such, even if he was to act, there was a strong possibility he would be treated with some sort of leeway.

The cellphone was cut off, and Aran gazed at Kang-Joon with a serious expression.

“It will be annoying if the soldiers arrive so we must finish the capture in 10 minutes.”

“Yes.”

“It will surely be a very unstable situation so don’t be the one attacking first, and follow my instructions once we found it.”

The two watched the GPS’s screen, moving quickly to the position in question. The passersby only looked at the Armor Coat wearing Hunters suddenly running by as if it was strange, not showing any unusual reactions. There was still no news the runaway Mutant was in Byeong-Jeom station’s vicinity. Kang-Joon took out a cylindrical palm-sized item from his chest pocket and handed it Aran.

“This...”

“It’s an Neuro-Disrupting Substance. If the enemy puts up some sort of resistance first the top priority is to somehow hit him with this at once.”

“This sort of thing, just where would you...”

A type-specific countermeasure against Awakens, Knights and, in this case, Mutants. It was a type of injector, a syringe that would administer the drug in an instant the moment the needle was

inserted. A drug with immediate effect in Mutants, a type of chemical 'Teaser Gun'.

Currently the target's moving speed was neither too fast nor too slow, moving through a big roadside using the darkness as cover. Kang-Joon and Aran's tracking speed was very fast, and were soon able to arrive at the point the target was at.

It was on a big roadside near Byeong-Jeom Elementary School.

"There."

Kang-Joon pointed at a young child walking on the street with its head leaning forward. Although it was unknown how it had acquired them, it was wearing clothes fitting its body and slippers that were a little too big. Although there were no passersby, that wasn't very uncommon and, on contrary, a young child walking by this street was a little unusual.

It wasn't arrested quickly and managed to escape because it managed to find terrifyingly ordinary clothes.

"A little kid..."

The Mutant had left that region before the defense area was stablished. Like that, it wouldn't be found even if strutted just beyond the defensive line. The corpses, especially the dead specimens' melted after death or had become lumps of meat and it wasn't known the specimens were actually young children.

However, Kang-Joon knew Acula conducted experiments with young children as subjects. And the GPS' position too moved in concert with the young child stride. Even if you were to consider the error margin it was clear to see the young child a little over 100 meters ahead was the target.

"What should we do?"

Aran asked, and Kang-Joon took out the revolver.

"We will try subjugating it first."

If they were to carelessly irritate it there was a risk some bystander would be injured, and, if it come to that, the situation would get very complicated. Kang-Joon quickly approached the boy, surprisingly muting out all the noise of his footsteps.

“Once we approach it I will prevent it from moving so Ms. Aran can seize it.”

“Are you going to... kill it?”

“Ms. Aran.”

Aran spoke as if slight afraid. Its outside appearance was merely that of a young child, and it was, indeed, a young child. Kang-Joon looked straight at Aran eyes with a hard look.

“We are not fooling around.”

“...”

It was just one of the possibilities, if things didn't go as they expected it had to be killed immediately. If a mistake was to occur it was natural for those on this side to be put at risk. In a single instant of hesitation life could move through life and death a dozen times. With Kang-Joon's cold words Aran grasped, at last, what sort of task they would be doing now.

They had come to hunt a monster who razed a laboratory down single-handedly and crushed iron gates like pieces of paper while rushing out, not to comfort a child.

The young child was walking normally, and, looking at it at it like that, it looked just like a young child whose slippers were only a size too big. When the distance approached roughly 10 meters Kang-Joon quickly narrowed the gap, and Aran followed suit.

As Kang-Joon was measuring the timing inside, the Mutant hastily turned its body around all of a sudden.

‘Damn!’

Kang-Joon quickly drew his revolver from its holster, and Aran

swiftly positioned herself getting ready to pounce.

“I surrender!”

While the Mutant lied face down on the floor.

“Spare me! It is a mistake! I wasn’t the one who killed them! No, it’s true I was the one who did it, but I can’t remember! So it’s like it wasn’t me! It was wrong to steal the clothes, but that’s, that’s...”

The Mutant was lying flat face down on the floor like a frog while begging for mercy. Seeing the Mutant complete surrender Kang-Joon’s and Aran’s expressions became stunned.

“Uh, well...”

Although it had extraordinarily sensed the two approach beforehand, absolutely no hostility could be felt from the other side. It was in the middle of running away and was just scared.

“We are not going to hurt you so stay still.”

“Un! I will listen to everything you say!”

At the end of Aran’s words the Mutant child answered energetically.

Soon, the military forces were deployed and no unnecessary armed situation occurred. The soldiers, confirming the Mutant had no thoughts of resistance, immediately captured it.

The soldiers brought the Mutant to the escorting car after having it wear a pair of reinforced handcuffs, while the child was looking around with a wondering expression. Although it had begged for its life to Kang-Joon, it didn’t look like a frightened child.

“Uncle, does bullets comes out of that?”

Asking all sort of foolish questions. A soldier who looked like a field commander saluted Kang-Joon.

“Thank you for your cooperation in the incident. Where are you

from?”

“We are from Hero Management.”

“Yes, Hero Management. You will be contacted privately later. A future reward is going to be given regarding this. Then, thank you for your help.”

“Just a moment.”

“Yes?”

“I am that child’s guardian.”

At Kang-Joon words the soldier tilted his head as if all he couldn’t understand what he heard.

“What did you say? ‘Guardian’...?”

“That child requested for Hero Management’s protection.”

“It did?And when was that?”

“Just a moment ago.”

Kang-Joon looked at the person in charge smiling, while he creased his forehead as if thinking what sort of situation was this after all. He checked with the Mutant if Kang-Joon was truly its guardian, and

“Un, he is my protector.”

The child answered like that, smiling with a foolish expression.

Kang-Joon had already completely hoodwinked the Mutant in the brief interval the soldiers were being mobilized.

‘You, if you go alone without a guardian and they were to recognize your abilities it’s unknown whether they will ever let you be free to go.’

‘Eek, that would be very bad...’

By simply spouting some words the child decided to receive Hero Management’s protection. Once the car was pulled and they had to

go Seo Aran rode together in the escorting vehicle, while Kang-Joon rode on the van and followed after them. In the back of the special escorting vehicle's reinforced container were riding three people — Seo Aran, a military official and, finally, the Mutant.

“Are there other Mutants who escaped together with you?”

“I am not sure... I don't think so. They were all killed.”

“I see, name?”

“Jiwon.”

“Age?”

“I don't remember.”

“Hometown?”

“I don't know.”

“Do you not remember anything?”

“No.”

“Hmmm... Must be a case of memory-loss.”

The military official knew there were many subjects that lost their memories due to the extreme pain and the confusion from the drugs employed during the Mutant experiments.

“Do you remember anything of the people involved?”

“I don't remember.”

That was a lie. The child knew the researchers' appearance, names, mannerisms, and details. However, Kang-Joon had given the child a warning.

‘Answer all the question with ‘I dont know’. Other than saying that, your name and information about your body are okay.’

Showing how much they knew would do nothing except having them detained for longer in the military facility.

“What sort of experiment have you gone through?”

“I don’t know.”

“What abilities do you possess?”

“I don’t know.”

“Name?”

“I don’t K-... Jiwon.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

The official stared at Jiwon fixedly.

“Hehe.”

And Jiwon just laughed with a foolish expression.

Chapter 30 - Does Red also Runs Through A Blue Heart? (5)

The news the incident was successfully resolved spread out like wildfire, while the military had yet to lift the boundary unable to know whether other Mutants had also escaped.

The press reported day after day about the gruesome human experiment, the human experiments a young child was subjected to, about how it was resolved by an small-scale management such as Hero Management, as well as reporting how the place said to be the capture point deviated from the military operation area, denouncing the military's incompetence.

Because of that the one in the middle of trouble was none other than Seol Yeong.

“You should be Hero Management President!”

“In this time incident Hero Management played a decisive role, can you give us a word on that!”

“Y-Yes?”

Seol Yeong, who was sitting at the company, suddenly received a barrage of flashes from intruding journalists leaving her dazed. Kang-Joon and, of course, Gina and Aran too hadn't made any sort of report to Seol Yeong, she had watched the news and grasped the truth moments ago.

“Do you have a special method to track it?”

Through the cracks among the numerous journalists Seol Yeong could only say the truth with a vacant expression.

“I don't know anything!”

immediately an article was uploaded in the internet, featuring the headline.

[Shock! Hero Management's president — insistently plays dumb.]

It was no surprise Seol Yeong saw that article later and lost her spirit.

“I want to make just a single phone call, so please step aside a little...”

[Hero Managent's CEO! Declares it is possible to solve everything if she only gives a single call!]

Every and each word she said ended giving birth to all sort of ridiculous articles.

Hwaseong's vicinity — military quarantine installations,

Choi Kang-Joon and Jiwon were currently in that facility being subjected to an investigation. Separated from Jiwon, who was the runaway Mutant, Kang-Joon as well entered an interrogation room.

“Mr. Choi Kang-Joon, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Belonging to Hero Management?”

“Yes.”

“Job is ‘Manager’.”

“Yes.”

“I am Captain Hado Hyuk from the Hunter Supervision Special Division. I will be asking you some simple questions from now on.”

“Go ahead.”

The Hunter Supervision Special Division, Kang-Joon had memories of hearing of a Hunter Unit operating in the military. They weren't responsible for quelling disasters nor hunting. It was an army and an investigation agency at the same time, specializing in tracking and subduing crimes and illegal activities involving Hunters.

Naturally, the tracking Division was entirely composed of Hunters, and it wasn't difficult for Kang-Joon to guess captain Hado Hyok standing in front of his eyes was what could be considered a Knight. This special Division was the first to be deployed to this runaway Mutant situation.

More than their official name this Division was more frequently addressed by their nickname.

Hounds.

Of course, no one addressed them as such in front of them.

The Captain stared at Kang-Joon patiently. There was no cameras or glass windows in the interrogation room Kang-Joon was in. There was nothing but a single feeble lightbulb turned on, and all the equipment was confiscated. There was no need to leave an armed individual in a military facility.

He then spoke in a seemingly threatening voice.

“Starting now all conversation we share will be neither recorded nor written down. All actions and measures taken in an investigation by this department are guaranteed by the Hunter Supervision Act, and are all considered legal being fully authorized by the state.”

“Sure.”

Kang-Joon replied carelessly. They possessed the authority to take actions independently, able of killing a captured Hunter who was deemed a dangerous person on the spot. In many ways, the present days were a time where the human rights were at an all time low. Under the absolute evil that was the monster's threat, these sorts of minor evils unwittingly became tolerated.

And, as if that absolute power was never meant to be used for a rightful purpose, the Hounds Division's authority was frequently abused.

“First, I will ask you the number one question.”

Captain Hado Hyok flipped through the file, asking. All while perfectly showing off his dominant position, posturing with his legs crossed.

“How did you locate the specimen?”

“Didn’t the one responsible for Suwon’s Monitoring Station tell that?”

“Yes, it was taken care of. I have received the report submitted by the involved parties.”

From the start, because of the different jurisdictions the Monitoring Station’s and the Hunter Supervision’s ranks weren’t treated exactly the same. Although the person in charge of that place was a Lieutenant Colonel, looking solely at power Captain Hado Hyok in front of his eyes possessed more authority.

“It seemed like that method was a breakthrough. A way no one had ever thought about. I thought it was an amazing method — ‘tracking the Core energy waves the runaway Mutant possessed’. However, I think there is a little dubious part.”

“What would that be?”

“How did you know that runaway Mutant was a special kind of mutant called BlueHeart, and was convinced it would emit Core energy waves above the S Rank? Mutants, basically, are those who hold a degree of Core energy. But they don’t hold the Core itself. Emitting at best nothing but energy waves between the F and C Rank. If everyone was able to make that sort of lucky guess tracking Hunter criminals would be very simple. Isn’t it strange?”

Captain Hado Hyok stared at Kang-Joon intently.

“It seems Mr. Kang-Joon knew S Rank Core energy waves would be detected in that runaway Mutant.”

“Could it be, you think I am an official of that illegal Pot?”

“It could be like that. Or, at least, you are someone with

knowledge about what sort of work was occurring there.”

“Hmm... This is difficult. Of course, I admit that point could certainly create a misunderstanding. And it is sufficient to be doubtful about. But...”

Kang-Joon shook his head slightly, grinning.

“Thinking of it in a certain way, it seems I have no obligation of answering it.”

“You are obliged to cooperate with the investigation.”

“I hold no such obligation.”

“Nonsense. As a citizen of Republic of Korea...”

“Look at this.”

Kang-Joon rummaged through his chest pocket throwing his Hunter license in the table with a ‘Thump’. The Captain raised a frown upon Kang-Joon’s arrogant attitude.

“I already know of your Hunter status. I verified it when you returned the equipment earlier. A unique background for a manager, but what of it?”

“Not the Hunter, look at the country.”

“...”

In the section the country was marked only a single ‘UN’ was written.

“It is an international Hunter certificate issued by UN. If you think it’s a forgery you can try inspecting it or you can try calling Korea’s branch office.”

“...”

“Sir Captain.”

Kang-Joon looked intently at him and spoke with his head tilted slightly in a taunting manner.

“I, am not a Korean person.”

There was no need to perform an obligation citizens of the Republic of Korea had to fulfill. However, Captain Hado Hyok spoke with a dark expression.

“Even being a foreigner you are obliged to cooperate in investigations.”

“I don’t want to cooperate. And it seems you have mistaken something.”

Kang-Joon chuckled as if it was funny.

“Since when was it legal to interrogate those who contributed in a target’s capture like this, as if they had committed a sin? When you was playing inside Hwaseong and running in circles who was searching, who was tracking, and who was reporting? Doing all the work you people had to do, being kind enough to inform you all? Maybe it was those involved in the experiment?”

“...”

“Hey.”

-Bam

Kang-Joon lifted his foot above the table muttering.

“Has you son of a b*tch lost your mind?”

The sudden cursing sent captain Hado Hyuk’s reeling, however, his spirit returned shortly after.

“A bastard who hasn’t figured out what sort of situation he is... Even if a punk like you was to disappear right now nobody would ever know, huh? Don’t you know what kind of people we are?”

“You can’t figure out the situation, damned hound mutt.”

“What did you say!?”

Kang-Joon relaxedly spouted abusive language, pointing to his ID with his chin.

“Do you think it’s okay to have a feud with and carry out this sort of shitty investigation against a B Rank Hunter certified by UN? Do you think I haven’t contacted UN’s Korea’s branch office before I arrived in this facility? Haven’t you ever thought about how fun things will get when the fact that you had a dispute with me, going so far as threatening me with murder, blows up? Huh?”

Kang-Joon crossed his arms while chuckling, muttering..

“This is already something closely watched by UN, if all the people who come here aren’t being treated exactly in accordance with the Human Rights’ Charter, things will get quite difficult. I departed in front of multiple people, following without resistance and coming to the Hounds Division, was that not enough?”

Kang-Joon stood up from his seat slowly. He picked his ID putting it inside his pocket, then placed his hand on Captain Hado Hyuk’s shoulder who had lost his spirit.

“Keep this in mind, Captain. I am a stateless person and whenever a nationality is needed UN is the one who guarantees my identity. Do you know what is their intention in doing this?”

“I-I... don’t know.”

“If you don’t know, you will live your entire life without knowing.”

-Creak!

Kang-Joon opened the investigation room’s door himself. Then he looked back, muttering as if he was being sarcastic.

“And don’t do this dark place thing in the future, buy a glass of iced americano if you want to ask for something.”

Hado Hyuk remained in the interrogation room watching as Kang-Joon opened the door himself heading out, unable to stop him. He had made a mistake, so even if he tried to use force it would simply be a situation where his head would be sent flying at once. One had to think twice about messing with a foreigner, when

it was one who had finished his certification on UN and whose return was already being waited on by UN Korea's branch office it was more than doubly so.

It was a problem that could escalate to international affairs.

“It wasn't a mistake. That sort of bastard is a Manager?”

Hado Hyuk mumbled as if everything was absurd as Kang-Joon got out the interrogation room. While Kang-Joon muttered to himself standing in a place where the camp exterior drill ground could be seen.

“Uwaaa.”

Patting down his chest.

“I really thought I was dead.”

Almost everything Kang-Joon spewed out was BS. UN's Korea branch must have no work to do if it was to wait for a single Hunter's safe return from such small military camp. Kang-Joon chuckled while exercising his chin.

“Swearing is difficult after all.”

The words Kang-Joon liked to spread were beautiful words.

It would be quite some time later Captain Hado Hyuk would understand what UN acting as a Hunter's identity guarantor signified.

And, realizing the person he was itching for punching in the face was now trying to calm his heart, that would take even longer.

Jiwon was also scheduled for an interrogation and receiving a stability test at the quarantine facility. Of course, the stability test was nothing but a pretext. Nothing but a disguised extension of the living body experiment. In this case, the result of the experiment was analyzed rather than the experiment itself.

The head of the Mutant research institute affiliated with the country was full of anticipation about what sort of new biometric data would be able to be obtained from Jiwon. From the start, Mutants created from illegal procedures were very unique, and the biometric information obtained from those captured whenever this sort of incident occurred was very valuable to the researchers.

Director Lee Dae-Jun was already full of expectation. Having looked at the incident data, there was a strong possibility the Mutant ability that child, Jiwon, had was something unheard of until now.

Once Jiwon was lying down on the operating table that would become the place it would reveal all the information it itself had no knowledge of. The director was confident he did his work well in the government institution.

Simply by being patient he would have the chance of unveiling the illegal procedures those who escaped or were held captive in the illegal surgeries spots brought with them. In the back of his mind he thought it would be good if those sort of illegal Pots could be found frequently. He soon entered the prepared operation room, looking at Jiwon who was gently laid down in there.

The nurse took a blood sample, and the blood was analyzed. They were searching for an anaesthetic matching Jiwon's blood type. Some time would be needed and the surgical team was waiting quietly. While the Director decided to focus on Jiwon's body doing a sensory check of his senses including pain.

Shown by the check results Jiwon's senses were all in good order. There were multiple people whose senses themselves were dead, and, in this case, the specimen condition was considered very favorable.

Jiwon wasn't scared looking at the director with clear eyes.

"Uncle, will I receive another surgery?"

“Speaking accurately it is not a surgery. It is all in order to know you don’t have any dangerous substances inside you. And if it ends well you will be able to go home.

He was already long fantasizing about what he would do with the new theories brought by the subject. Jiwon looked up at the director briefly moving its sight to the ceiling afterwards. Jiwon’s face was illuminated by a surgery lamp’s white light, and Jiwon laughed with an ‘hehe’.

“I wonder if you will lie as much as that uncle?”

“What do you mean?”

The director wasn’t able to understand who Jiwon was comparing him with.

“Uncle also knows I don’t have a ‘home’.”

Jiwon smiled cheerfully in the operation room. And, all the staff inside the operation room were dazed by that big smile.

“The reason you can say such words is because you have no intention of sending me anywhere like home.”

It was words who pointed out the director’s inconsistency sharply.

Chapter 31 - Does Red Also Runs Through A Blue Heart (6)

Jiwon didn't know which sort of value its body could possibly have. However, when he saw the look in the other people's eyes, he could understand some of it. The director revealed very openly in his eyes a look of someone who wanted something from Jiwon.

From the operation table Jiwon saw more revealed in their eyes than in the outside appearance of those people, hidden behind their masks.

The eyes that perform the surgery, the eyes that administer the drugs, the eyes that keep track of the progress, the eyes that give the post evaluation, the eyes that see the outcome, the eyes that see the failure, the eyes that see the dying bodies,

the eyes that commits murder.

Jiwon had faced those eyes as he stayed in the laboratory. Jiwon was well aware the director's eyes were not so different from the 'eyes' he had seen. Jiwon also remembered vividly Choi Kang-Joon's eyes, the one who had captured him and had suddenly gone somewhere else.

Eyes seething with fury.

It couldn't understand what he was furious with, but Jiwon saw the look in Kang-Joon's eyes were tinged by rage.

The director didn't say anything to Jiwon's comment. After all, sharing a conversation with the specimen was nothing but a passing whim. There was no reason to respond logically. The director didn't present any reply to Jiwon's words, and neither did Jiwon insist in a conversation.

If only things could grow easier henceforth,
that was Jiwon's thoughts.

“The regenerative power coefficient is more than a thousand, with this much no narcotics will have any effect.”

“Exceeding a thousand?”

“Yes.”

With the blood analysis complete the director frowned hearing the assistant words. Assuming an ordinary human regenerative power as 1, a Knight's regenerative power was about 50. While Mutants, although differing through types, usually possessed regenerative power ranging about 150.

However, the Mutant in front of his eyes showed a regenerative power's reaction more than a thousand times that of an ordinary human.

‘Which sort of bastards did this sort of experiment after all?’

Reinforcing the regenerative power first before a Mutant procedure, regenerating regardless of the body collapse allowing for adaption was the basic among the Mutant procedures basis. However, the fact regeneration itself wasn't the goal could only be understood seeing that this Mutant had destroyed the research institute single-handedly.

Raising the regenerative power to 1000 was something which had no technology for to begin with, and it was so because there was no reason to. However, what to say about a procedure which could only be carried with this sort of super regenerative power as requisite? The destroyed Mutant Pot's database had already been completely destroyed. It was common for that sort of illegal Pots to put such safety devices in order to protect their technology, as such, in the end, the only clue was Jiwon in front of his eyes.

The director's heart was beating wildly.

This, it might really be the experiment's result who will send the Mutant academy in turmoil, capable of flipping it upside down. And, that result was now lying down in front of him.

The doctor cut Jiwon abdomen slightly with the scalpel in order to see the super regenerative power with his own eyes. Jiwon hadn't received any anesthesia but didn't raise a single eyebrow.

The injury seemed to want to bleed slightly then it healed just like that. The scar-free sight was terribly weird.

They might need a truck full of regeneration inhibitor if they intend to do a proper surgery.

-Bang!

“Stop the operation! Stop!”

Suddenly the one in charge of the Hounds Unit kicked the operation's room door, going in shouting.

“What are you doing?”

“Director, end the operation right now.”

He shouted severely at the Director with an urgent expression. This was the Hounds Division, an almighty military Unit which had freed itself from all military hierarchy. Hearing those words the director looked at him bewildered. The commander of the Hounds Division, Major Kim Kyung-Joon, was breathing roughly while speaking.

“Remove all the equipments in the operation room right now!”

The director couldn't even begin to guess what the heck was going on. Although the Major was mumbling about how the Union might come or how it might result in an international affair, he couldn't understand a single thing he heard.

Jiwon, against all odds, came down from the operation table, and was assigned an area in the barracks with Kang-Joon who had volunteered as guardian. Starting now every interrogation would be carried orally, and Kang-Joon would be accompanying Jiwon in the interrogation room.

No violence will be used during that process. Kang-Joon was

lying down while watching the TV placed in the barracks, while Jiwon was looking up at him with sparkling eyes.

“Uncle, what did you do?”

Kang-Joon glanced at Jiwon. It was uncertain whether the child would be able to understand even if it was to hear about the issues concerning human rights.

“Those are adult matters. And I am not an uncle.”

“Then what should I call you?”

“Hmm...”

Kang-Joon stared fixedly at Jiwon. Although it could indeed be considered as pretty, it possessed an appearance that couldn't be certainly judged as a young boy or girl.

“You, are you a girl or a boy?”

“I don't remember.”

“Hmm...”

Kang-Joon wasn't particularly caught off guard. It was just cases like this where those who were suddenly thrown in having to experiencing the pain in the middle of the experimental process lost their memories were common. Those who didn't know what or who they were were common. A situation where they wouldn't be able to recall anything and asking them to try to think of it would do no good.

A hollow, empty shell.

Without memory or past, a state where they ended becoming simply a blank slate left out of reality.

“Hyung or Oppa. Which one would you like to call?”

“Hmm...”

Jiwon smiled innocently, replying.

“Hyung!”

“Okay then.”

“Will big brother also do surgeries?”

“I won’t make that sort of thing.”

“What then?”

“Well...”

Kang-Joon set his sight on Jiwon. It was a condition already far detached from an ordinary life. Kang-Joon had confidence in taking Jiwon and going out of this facility safely to begin with. However, he had only thought about getting hold of an illegal Mutant, if it was this sort of young child things would be a little different.

It wasn’t a sentimental decision based on moral principles such as it being wrong to send a child to a dangerous place.

First of all,

children were annoying. Difficult to control and easily frightened. Colleagues having to argue with a child while hunting with their lives at stake? Nonsense.

“What do you want to do?”

“I want to eat a lot of delicious things!”

Hearing such words startled Kang-Joon. Jiwon simply wanted to eat something delicious and because of food had all but stopped thinking about what he would be subjected to. Kang-Joon looked at that sort of Jiwon and showed a wry smile.

“That isn’t what...”

-KnockKnock

“Mr. Choi Kang-Joon, permission to enter.”

“No need. Speak from there.”

In response to the sound outside the door Kang-Joon replied half-heartedly.

“Doctor Lee Dae-Wun requested for a meeting.”

“Who is that?”

“He is the director of one of the Mutant clinics run by the government.”

“I get it.”

Kang-Joon slowly rose from his seat. While Jiwon tilted his head staring at Kang-Joon.

“If someone enters and asks you something do not say anything until I come back.”

“Yes! Big Brother!”

Jiwon answered spiritedly. Although he couldn't understand why that was so, it seemed Jiwon held a favorable impression of Kang-Joon.

‘No, it should be like that with everyone.’

There was never really an instance of Jiwon displaying hostility at someone.

Kang-Joon was guided by a soldier going to the place Director Lee Dae-Wun was in. It wasn't an interrogation room this time but a military conference room, and an iced americano was prepared.

“Hello. I am KML(Korean Mutant Laboratory)’s director Lee Dae-Wun.”

“Hero Management’s Choi Kang-Joon.”

Kang-Joon seated himself after offering a mild greeting. The director offered the coffee, and Kang-Joon accepted it. Director Lee Dae-Wun saw Choi Kang-Joon’s attitude was very unique and that he was not someone who lost his calmness like most civilians when entering a military facility.

“Haha, I heard you main occupation was Hunt-”

“Okay, take out the main point.”

Kang-Joon had no thoughts about staying comfortably for long in this facility. He didn't know whether a matter would occur any moment setting him in a crisis suddenly, his goal was to quickly go out after handling just the tasks he had to. The director raised a brief frown being interrupted mid-speech, but his smile returned again soon after.

“Are you that specimen's guardian?”

“That is part of it.”

“We will send it back after a simple test at the facility.”

“Un.”

“After that, what about handing over that specimen to KML? The basic human rights are indeed strictly protected by UN, but how dangerous would be to do so even for a specimen that has already lost control once? That sort of thing would be itself a violation of the human rights. If you do hand over the suspect to KML, we will do a full genetic factor as well as power measurement, and if it judged safe we will return it to you. As the one in charge of the inspection, it would be good to keep in mind it would be difficult leaving this facility if you don't have my consent.”

Nothing but nice-sounding words no different from a threat. In order to bring Jiwon and go out of here his permission was needed, being observed by Union or whatever there was no need to say he would never send Jiwon back to start with.

“Once you accept my proposal I am willing to give you a small thank you note. I can't even guess how dangerous making use of a prototype Mutant in the field is...”

‘Do you intend to enroll a Mutant who might be a defective product as a Hunter in the field?’. It was that sort of words. In addition, he expressed his willingness of resorting to bribes. Kang-Joon looked at the director smiling. And, taking that as a signal of acceptance, the Director displayed a matching smile.

However, what emerged from Kang-Joon lips were completely different words.

“I don’t know if you heard, but I was a Hunter before I became a manager.”

“Ah, yes... I have been told it was like that.”

“It’s not only in Korea where Mutants are illegally raised, the same can be found in many parts of the world. Whether they are discovered and apprehended by the police or military, or Mutants who escaped, aren’t they all experiment specimens to begin with?”

“Yes, yes. It is indeed like that.”

“Do you know those subjects are being traded in hundred of millions? Sold to the Mutant industry or laboratories through illicit means.”

At that words the director complexion took on a shade of pale-white.

“Ah, t-that... it’s the first time I hear it.”

“The illegal experiments in living beings are carried in the underground research facilities and only their results are snatched away. If we were to talk only about money, billions of dollars are saved, is only that what those hundreds of millions of lives are worth?”

Kang-Joon took a few gulps of the coffee, speaking as if telling a joke afterwards.

“The subjects who are secured safely in the laboratory or Mutants who escaped from there are, usually, among those who die from allergic seizure, shock or blood poisoning during the stability test. No.”

Kang-Joon looked at the director, whose complexion had become ashen, muttering.

“Are ‘said’ to have died.”

The director was unable to say any words.

“People who are the end results of illegal experiments are said to do die just like that? All while the press continuously writes about those Mutants Pot’s hygiene conditions dangerous standards making use of a single adhesive tape as bandage or how in those dirty facilities only a single syringe is used again and again, it’s strange. The subjects who remained unharmed even when using a scalpel with dried blood clots are said to meet sure end when given a clean experimental environment. Is it not strange? And when they are said to have died during the stability tests all that is said by everyone are things like ‘Hm’, ‘Yeah’, ‘It was like that’, or ‘Poor people’.”

Kang-Joon rolled the coffee in his mouth, savoring its scent. The truth was Kang-Joon wasn’t, in fact, really fond of coffee.

“Those subjects are sold to pharmaceutical companies or laboratories unable to do anything, being dissected alive. Only the laboratory changed, having to go through exactly the same things. Until they die. In truth, it is unknown whether to those people surviving was really a fortunate thing.”

“That, why are you telling this story after all?”

“Do you really not know?”

“It is the first time I hear of it, I can assure that.”

“Then it must be one of the two.”

Kang-Joon looked at the director whose vigor had already been suppressed, smiling.

“Either you have being living a unfulfilling life until now, or you are lying.”

“I, as a researcher, have never done a single thing I should be ashamed for!”

“Were you not going on and on, using words such as ‘specimen’

or ‘making use’, speaking as if haggling over an item?”

Repeatedly using ‘specimen’ whenever mentioning Jiwon or ‘make use of’ in the field, the director spoke that sort of words treating Jiwon as if an object.

“Mr. director.”

“...”

“Are you currently seeing that child as a person? Are you not mistaking it for something like a data disk? Did you not say, right now, you was willing to give money if it was to be sold?”

Kang-Joon didn’t get angry, talking with a serene voice. However, the director’s fingertips were quivering.

“If we were to understand more of the knowledge about mutants we would be able to protect much more people. Monsters are still a threat to the world, if a new species of Mutant were to be created people would be able live much more safer than now! Why would that be a bad thing?”

“Speaking of the public’s benefit, rationalizing your own immorality because of the lack of logic is a very common way of solving all problems.”

“W-What are you...!”

Unable to refute Kang-Joon, having it all pointed out the attitude the director carried transformed, his white terrified face reddening slightly. Being humiliated or having their flaws laid bare wasn’t something people would like regardless of time or place.

“In the end, is that itself not an acknowledgement of Mr. Director’s intention in selling Jiwon for money or of killing it as a sacrifice for a new thesis?”

Suddenly trying to justify those acts placed himself in a difficult situation, being no different from admitting it. Hearing that words the director didn’t speak biting his lips repeatedly.

“This is a huge slander. No one would ever believe it.”

“And if people do believe, what would happen?”

“It seems you want to understand why we have laws for. Should we do as you wish?”

“Well, then you will need to repeat the dialogue we had today in the court.”

Kang-Joon had no thing like a recorder.

“‘I am willing to give you money so hand over the Mutant’ — is that how your testimony will be like?”

“...”

Kang-Joon could see, he might not be able to ascertain the KML director’s skills but his proficiency with words was severely lacking.

Translation’s Notes:

Hyung and Oppa:

Both words means ‘Older brother’. Easy peasy. Nah just kidding, things aren’t so simple in Korean.

Hyung(형) is used by males, while Oppa(우빠) is used by females.

The key point is those words aren’t meant to be used only between siblings. It is a pretty common respect/closeness/endearment thing. If the person isn’t really a real senior and you are a little close and no other address takes precedence people will most likely refer to them as Hyung/Oppa. (Obs.: Precedence as in ‘Teacher’ beats ‘Big brother’ kind of thing).

Remember Koreans are pretty rigid on this respect thing. Which makes this all kinda of a rule and kills a little of the magic. Are people calling me ‘big brother’ because they really think of me as such or just because I am older? I, as a non-native, am quite bothered by such thoughts.

Except kids, although I was never addressed as Hyung or Oppa, being called uncle by young kids always made me smile (although I am not even that old!). No matter how much of an imp they might be they always look super adorable. (Except my real nephew – that guy aint cute at all)

Ah, following the same rules we have:

noona (누나) = males speaking to older females

unnie (언니) = females speaking to older females

dongsaeng (동생) = BOTH little sister and little brother.

Yu-dongsaeng(여동생) = Little sister. Mostly real sibilings.

Nam-dongsaeng(남동생) = Little Brother. Mostly real sibilings.

Chapter 32 - Does Red Also Runs Through A Blue Heart? (7)

Seeing him move between joy and sorrow with each of Kang-Joon's words one would be able to understand the Director's talent with words from miles away.

"Mr. Director, this too is for Mr. Director's best interests."

"What are you saying?"

"Do you know of Gauss Pharmaceuticals company incident?"

"If it's that... No way..."

Although information concerning BlueHeart was almost non-existent, Gauss Pharmaceutical company incident was famous.

Gauss Pharmaceuticals, a multinational enterprise, where the enterprise's head as well as executives were all murdered due to some sort of terrorism. The reason for why it was so was unknown. There were rumours saying it was a vengeful act carried by Mutants who had escaped, and many said it was a systematic and violent way to keep their opponents in check between rival enterprises.

However, the phantasmagorical rumors roaming through the business circle were completely different.

Gaussian Pharmaceuticals was operating a secret illegal Mutant Pot, and the terrorism act was a retaliation related to that. It is uncertain what Gauss Pharmaceuticals experimented with and if the Mutant Pot was genuine. And whether all that was indeed the truth was still a mystery.

However, the circumstances of Gauss Pharmaceuticals operating an Mutant Pot were quite certain. Gauss Pharmaceuticals possessed new technology far ahead of its peers, and that technology source was unclear.

If it wasn't operating an enormous number of illegal Pots, such accomplishment would have been impossible. As Gauss Pharmaceuticals's executives were murdered the researches data were gone with them.

The director saw Jiwon's regenerative power which surpassed a thousand. Although a full-fledged investigation was carried in the US — where their headquarters is located — the fact the investigation results were never made public was very unusual.

Because of all of that the Mutant technology had regressed some steps. It was unknown whether they could make that sort of Mutant if they had Gauss Pharmaceuticals' missing technology.

Hearing Kang-Joon's words the director understood Jiwon was completely different from an ordinary specimen. Most of all, if it was a problem related with that mysterious terrorism incident and Gauss Pharmaceuticals, it wasn't something to mess with.

“You... How are you certain of that?”

“I am not...”

Kang-Joon spoke like that still without an ounce of concern.

“What I said might be a lie. It could be a simple bluff. However, isn't it a little strange?”

Although he didn't glare looking at the director in a relaxed manner, to the director the gaze was pressuring as if it was trying to pierce through his soul.

“Have you ever seem an Illegal Mutant Pot that was so clean and well-organized like that?”

The reason was the majority of illegal Pot were very dirty, messy, and inadequate. But, when looking at this incident's scene pictures, although many parts were destroyed, that underground facility was very tidy. Valuable medicines were stockpiled, and only the data was lost, with the medical supplies and equipment they had composed of the best products available.

“The judgement is something to Mr. Director to do.”

In the end the initiative rested with the director. The director still had the authority of releasing or having Jiwon detained in this facility. While the manager in front of him, Choi Kang-Joon, was threatening the director with a completely unrelated topic.

A cruel terrorism case involving Gauss Pharmaceuticals, and the specimen which might be the outcome of that.

A situation where an incredible information could be obtained. It was, clearly, a very big prey, however, nothing was known about what would happen upon swallowing it. Putting aside how the retired Hunter and manager in front of his eyes knows of that group's connection with the terrorism at Gauss Pharmaceuticals...

The director suddenly realized.

This person was formerly a Hunter and possessed an extremely detailed knowledge of the dirty things pervading through the Mutant industry. Had an extremely deep understanding of how the Mutants who were captured were traded by hundred of millions, and each and every one of the disgusting acts committed with the stability test as excuse.

Although I don't now why he is a manager,
although I can't understand why he would be here...

“You... Impos-”

“Now, be careful about guesses and dangerous misunderstandings. I want to say just one thing...”

Kang-Joon cut off the Director's words as if he knew what he would say. Only throwing a few words.

“I am hungry and all I can think about now is whether I can grab something to eat.”

It were words that didn't have anything to do the situation. Kang-Joon brought that sort of topic sucking at the coffee's straw

with absolutely no class.

“I will wait for a positive answer.”

Kang-Joon held the coffee exiting the conference room. The director felt as if he had seen a ghost. There wasn't ever any concrete threat. Neither was there a word about killing him. However, inside that atmosphere the director felt he had died and returned back to life an unknown amount of times.

If Kang-Joon words were correct, Jiwon was a specimen that they couldn't carelessly touch. He couldn't tell which part was truth, and which part was a bluff. A simple manager being related with Gauss Pharmaceuticals' terrorism incident was something exceeding beyond nonsense, rubbish that couldn't be trusted.

However, when considering the various circumstances, Kang-Joon's words couldn't be completely taken as bluff. If the extremely well-organized underground Pot and the incredibly outstanding experiment's regenerative power were to be taken into account it was believable.

The chief was the one in charge of KML, a laboratory who worked under the government, and, as it usually is with those which worked in the government, he too understood well the methods to survive.

When giving cards where victory was uncertain, folding was always easier. He didn't have an adventurous character. And had too much at the moment to risk now because of an adventure and greed for achievement.

They were detained for a whole week in the military facility. Eventually, because of the 'real' stability test, Jiwon had to go through some tests. All who occurred under Kang-Joon presence. Followed by some checks about mental state and what sort of ability Jiwon could display.

Although some problems were found with the results, the

director had no choice but issuing a 'safe' assessment in order to send out Kang-Joon and Jiwon as quickly as possible. Rather than curiosity, all he thought of was sending the dangerous manager and Mutant duo out quick.

Every problem caused by the Mutant in the future would be handled by Hero Management, and with Choi Kang-Joon signing-in as guardian taking up the legal responsibilities the two were able to leave the military camp.

Jiwon looked at Kang-Joon and the guards posts in turns as if it couldn't believe it. While Kang-Joon led Jiwon. The two didn't talk much within the military camp.

Jiwon couldn't remember much, and Kang-Joon wouldn't say anything first if Jiwon didn't ask. Jiwon tried hard to keep up, walking beside Kang-Joon.

And once they had exited the military camp, Jiwon spoke as if making a confession.

"Big Brother."

"What?"

"The truth is I remember it all."

Jiwon had consistently played dumb about every crime, saying he couldn't remember anything when meeting Kang-Joon for the first time. While Kang-Joon spat out with a sour look hearing the abrupt confession.

"I know."

"..."

Hearing Kang-Joon's answer Jiwon couldn't find any words to say. Dropping its head forward while murmuring.

"Am I not a person?"

Kang-Joon stared fixedly at Jiwon speaking like that. Hesitating for a moment. It certainly is different from the notion of ordinary

people. Mutant, Knight, Awaken are all — by biological standards — not humans.

But, if you ask if they are a person, it makes things a little abstract.

“If you are thinking about that sort of thing, you are still a person.”

“I don’t understand.”

“People who have become monsters don’t think about that sort of thing at all.”

Believing oneself to be a person, or even acknowledging to not being one. Continuously questioning whether they are still a person or not, was proof they had yet to lose their humanity. Jiwon was young, it couldn’t grasp specifically what Kang-Joon’s words meant. But it realized faintly Kang-Joon’s tone was laced with deep sorrow.

Jiwon, while fully conscious, killed the people who had committed those sort of atrocious experiments to him. Carrying a feeling of guilt. Kang-Joon didn’t say those bastards deserved to die. Those sort of words were unnecessary.

“Why is big brother helping me?”

“I am not really helping you though.”

Kang-Joon stared at Jiwon intently. Although it was difficult dealing with children in many ways, Kang-Joon thought the ability Jiwon possessed was worth making use of even if that flaw was to be put aside. Although it was a regenerative power, the potential it possessed was formidable.

Kang-Joon formed an incredibly wicked smile, looking at Jiwon.

“Now, shouldn’t you foot the bill?”

Kang-Joon didn’t know whether his actions now were even more despicable than the director’s. However, Jiwon was pretty clever,

and could roughly understand what Kang-Joon words meant. There was no memory, but that didn't mean there was no knowledge, Jiwon knew what a Hunter was. And accepted the fate of becoming one. Whatever happened it would be better than lying down atop an operating table like a corpse, living being poked with a syringe. Whatever Kang-Joon did, it would be insignificant compared with all the things he had gone through.

Jiwon looked at Kang-Joon smiling innocently.

“Don't I have to eat before paying the bill?”

“Look at this little bastard.”

Kang-Joon seeing Jiwon laughing with a ‘Kukuku’ broke out in a bitter smile.

“Then, should we go eat something delicious first?”

“Yes, big brother!”

Before the two went back, they decided to find somewhere with good food to eat.

Hero Management as the one who did the biggest contributions to the presidential decree's operation was rewarded a special award as well as a medal of merit. Seol Yeong received the award with a blank face as if it was all an unimaginable thing, while Choi Kang-Joon, the one had made the actual contributions to the situation, had yet to show his face.

Due to that Hero Management debut to the world was nothing short of a complete success.

Of course, that was all but empty looks and it was still the same as before.

The existence of an illegal facility in Hwaseong's underground, where people were cut open and forcefully made into Mutants, brought shock to many people.

[The corpses in the illegal Pot in Hwaseong were unexpectedly found to be from people without Korean nationality. Currently, the police as well as military are carrying out an investigation...]

As always, there was no one who thought this incident would be would be completely uprooted. Able to do nothing except hope that sort of misfortune wouldn't befall over them.

And, after a truly long time, Kang-Joon reported for duty in Hero Management.

“Mr. Kang-Joon! Are you alright? Was you hurt somewh-”

Beside Kang-Joon a small young child a little over 130 something tall was looking at Seol Yeong from Kang-Joon's side with wide open eyes.

“Hello!”

Jiwon greeted energetically, smiling seeing the startled Seol Yeong.

“I am Jiwon!”

Kang-Joon placed his hand on Jiwon's head while smiling.

“I brought a new Hunter.”

“Ah, this child can't be that...”

“Yes, Mutant.”

“Doesn't this violates the Labor Standards Law?”

“If it is laws, whenever Hunters as well as Hunter employment are concerned, Hunters are all an exception.”

Hearing those words Seol Yeong stared at the small child for a while, feeling an emotion she was unable to describe. While the adorable child was looking up seol Yeong inquisitively.

And, what Seol Yeong did was simple.

“My...”

-Rush!

“Ah.”

Seol embraced Jiwon, stroking his hair carefully.

“So young and yet how much hardships...?”

Seol Yeong's eyes were completely wet with tears. Then she glared at Kang-Joon yelling suddenly.

“Mr. Kang-Joon! Please, give me a little call if you gonna do that! It was too, too shocking! Suddenly hearing you were in a military zone detention, do you understand how anxious I was?”

At that words Kang-Joon replied with a nonchalant expression.

“I had good food and was treated well.”

“The food was delicious.”

“... Sigh, really...”

Seol Yeong had a feeling the child which had entered was somehow similar with Choi Kang-Joon. Thick skin like this wasn't something generally seem on children. Seol Yeong could only smile helplessly seeing Kang-Joon was still shameless as ever.

“You worked hard this time...”

And, as if it was a customary thing, the appreciative words were not left out.

Chapter 33 - Battle Station (1)

As most would have it, the kinds of abilities the Hunters possessed didn't break many laws themselves. And with time, Hunters, who kept the monsters at bay, received a special treatment legally despite being seen as part of society.

It was not an uncommon thing for young children to dive into hunting, and Kang-Joon too went to the Academy at 15, starting Hunting since he was seventeen years old. Of course, although Jiwon did indeed seem like a young child not much older than 12, that wouldn't become a big issue either.

In the industry, the most important thing wasn't age, but skill.

Hero Management's and Jiwon's contract was different from regular ones. In this case Hero Management Inc. itself became Jiwon's guardian, and, as such, various procedures needed to be followed and team leader Song, who did nothing but sleep, was the one to take charge of that process.

Jiwon, different from the other two, would, from now until when it became an adult, work while taking Seol Yeong and Hero Management as the ones legally responsible for it.

Although there were many cases where young children were exploited due to unfair contracts when they became Hunters, Seol Yeong didn't do that sort of thing.

And after seeing Jiwon's ability for a while, her expression became peculiar.

"Well, it is fortunate it is an ability that doesn't weights on one's mind."

Among Mutants there are people who sprouted tentacles from their limbs, the majority which were usually disgusting or extremely gruesome. Abilities which deformed their bodies were commonly seem, and there were occasionally cases where those

unfamiliar would throw up at the sight.

Jiwon's ability looked more mysterious than unnerving, and rather than an ability originated from its body had an atmosphere similar to a Awaken's.

The sight of a blue mist rising from its whole body was certainly unique and mysterious.

Without any place to stay Jiwon ended living in Kang-Joon's apartment complex. But despite all that Seol Yeong couldn't hide her small discomfort having to bring a young child to work, even if that child was a Mutant.

However, if things were to be questioned closely Seo Aran too was underage. And Hero Management was lacking one person to begin with, therefore, although a young child they had earned a Mutant possessing outstanding potential.

That day, Choi Gina and Seo Aran, who were still in the middle of training, were introduced to the child Kang-Joon had brought. They were 3 from now on and would become and go into action as a Team. All of them had a meal, mixing both a greeting and a meet-together.

"Without me it's probable you two have being eating nothing but delivery food once again..."

"..."

"..."

"Do you know which job doesn't allows overweight? Hunter."

Talking of things like that. Of course, in Seo Aran's case she was unaffected, but Kang-Joon pointed to Choi Gina.

"Ms. Gina, you have certainly gained a couple pounds?"

"T-That is too much!"

"Too much and has to stop, you know you have to exercise regularly."

Although saying so seemed like an exaggeration, gaining weight was something they couldn't ever permit as it was an issue concerning their survival. In the case of Mutants there were many cases where food intake was unnecessary, however, Jiwon ate food with relish. It was just, there were completely no wastes generated. Rather than an Mutant, it was as if it had become a creature completely different from a human.

“It is delicious big brother!”

“Ah, yeah.”

“Big sisters should eat more too.”

“Yeah, Jiwon must eat a lot too.”

The problem was, in the woman's case, Jiwon suddenly started to address them as ‘unnies’. However, although confusing in many ways, everyone was going along with it. It was as if everyone had gained a cute and lovely child as younger sibling, so there was nothing to dislike. And although Aran watched everything with the same taciturn expression, she herself hugged Jiwon suddenly without warning not longer later when watching TV.

She seated Jiwon atop her lap with her sight on the TV. The method of expressing it was not that good, but it was clearly an attempt of showing affection. Although Jiwon lacked common sense at times, the procedures aftereffects, if they were only that much, were rather low.

Negatives feelings like anger or sadness had disappeared, and the problem of always taking on a slightly happy attitude could be seen as fortunate. Jiwon watched TV held inside Aran's arms as if it all was a dream.

From here on out they could always stay like this, until a special task was assigned at least.

Starting now the Team composed of all 3 people was organized, and the very first thing Kang-Joon did was hold a counseling with

Jiwon. Although the two shared many talks through their 2 week-long stay in the Military Camp, they had no talks regarding Jiwon's abilities. On contrary, rather than the person with the ability itself Kang-Joon had much more knowledge.

“Your ability, BlueHeart, is the result of a plan of remodeling the human race.”

“Really?”

“It was a crazy plan to enhance the Human species itself creating a new type of human being.”

“Really?”

“And as such, you have now become something intrinsically different from a human being.”

“Really?”

Obviously, Jiwon didn't understand a single thing he heard. Only tilting his head with an innocent expression. And Kang-Joon promptly gave up his intention of explaining anything.

“You was inserted with a heart different from an ordinary person's heart. Right?”

“Un, I remember that.”

Shoving a monster's heart in a human being, a plan to make someone display strength like that of a monster.

“At any case, in the past I have once found and destroyed underground Mutant Pots from those crazy bastards from Acula, who carried experiments similar to that. Well, that sort of story isn't necessary... What I meant to talk of is your ability. Which sort of ability you can display.”

“Which ability?”

“To begin with, can that blue fog you sprayed make your body stronger?”

“Un. But it is very tiring.”

It was similar to a Knight's body reinforcement. Although the method of employing the Core Energy was different and it showed a little more destructive focus, the Core Energy 'matter' could be laid around, enclosing the body.

“Among the S Rank Monster there is one called AlphaDragonoid.”

A Boss Class monster, a draconian-type monster sporting light blue scales across its entire body. A Higher-Monster with very quick movements able to make use of Core Energy directly.

“You was probably transplanted with that monster heart.”

Kang-Joon had observed the ability several times, and judged it as such seeing how something akin to a huge dragon claw was formed in Jiwon's hand whenever that form was activated.

“Then I can use that monster's abilities?”

“Yes, I remember that bastard reinforcing his body just like you, and he could also shoot a Core Breath from his mouth.”

“Core Breath?”

“Yeah, blasting an energy blast through the mouth. Do you understand what a 'laser-beam' is?”

“W-Wow... I don't what that is... But it sounds very cool!”

Jiwon was a child that lacked common sense in more ways than one, and hearing Kang-Joon words he clenched his fists tightly with shiny eyes.

“Owaaaaa! It didn't come out...”

Trying to use it once, however, nothing but a little blue mist was vomited slightly from its mouth. The scene of a child pouring blue mist from their mouth in front of one's eyes was quite a freaky sight.

“The total amount of Core Energy you have is still too low, even if you are a Mutant you still have to absorb Cores expanding your internal reservoir little by little in the end.”

Put simply, the potential is excellent, but saying Jiwon was still at a ‘low level’ wasn’t wrong. Even so, it will eventually become possible to use the AlphaDragonoid’s abilities in a wider scope including Core absorption. And not even Kang-Joon could gauge properly what sort of potential BlueHeart still possessed.

Kang-Joon watched Jiwon, who was snickering like an idiot, saying casually.

“I have no intentions of telling you what is right or wrong, or whether murder is good or bad. However, promise me only this.”

“Un.”

“Do not carelessly kill people. Understood?”

“Yes.”

Even though it was nothing but an oral promise, Jiwon replied strongly. There were many cases of Mutants with twisted personalities, but Kang-Joon saw that among those Jiwon could be considered a pretty decent guy.

With this the Team would possess a varied assortment. Capable of arranging stable as well as basic formations. And most of all had a Mutant with many applications, while possessing all the attack power they might need which was what Kang-Joon appreciated the most.

Defense and vanguard: Seo Aran

Main attacker: Jiwon, Peculiarity: High defense level with Core Energy release

Assistance and rear support: Choi Gina, Peculiarity: Able to use Avatar in case of emergency

Seo Aran had outstanding well-rounded capability, and the other

two team members — despite still being inexperienced — could, in a certain form, be considered hidden cards. Kang-Joon checked each of the three abilities one by one nodding his head smiling as if he was satisfied.

‘The world is unfair as always.’

A world where talent is everything. Even if you put in all your effort, if you don’t have Talent you were bound to fail. Being a Knight required talent, being a Mutant required talent, and being a Awaken too required talent.

Kang-Joon, without any sort of talent himself, went through numerous dangerous moments in order to survive. However, to him that sort of life style was from now on a thing of the past.

If you can’t obtain talent, you can raise talented people. With money, energy crystals or anything else they might need, the team members whom he employed could be cultivated easily. Kang-Joon’s plan was progressing in a fast pace, and now, at this moment, the most important piece had fallen in place.

Although not at a high level, all of them had enough potential — worthy of becoming high-ranked. On contrary, If he met an already high-ranked Team it was probable he would be the one bossed around.

Rather, Kang-Joon thought it was fortunate to meet a Team composed of newcomers with remarkable talent. They were greenhorns, and had no choice but trust and follow after him.

With the Team formed they didn’t throw themselves in the field immediately. Basic teamwork had to be built and adjusted first. If they were deployed as they were right now it was impossible to tell whether they would get in each other ways and if accidents such as friendly fire would happen.

During the 2 weeks Choi Gina and Seo Aran had not laid idle, and Seo Aran was quite adept with the body reinforcing. And having

trained for about 2 weeks, Seo Aran displayed her mastery over the baseball pitches.

-Kang!

Together with a light sound the baseball shot at Seo Aran's body bounced off.

"Good. The training clearly produced results."

And,

"Ah... Do it..."

-Uuuung!

Choi Gina with half-lidded eyes was rolling a baseball in the floor from a distance away, mumbling. It was a facial expression of someone who had touched on the feeling of the Half-Trance state.

It was still not at a point it could be used in a real battle. However, it was an important first step nonetheless. Choi Gina shook her head, recovering her mind soon after, dropping her head as if sullen. During the 2 weeks Kang-Joon was gone the best results she could reach was moving a single baseball, and that too with great difficulty naturally.

"Amazing."

"You are making fun of me... Sorry."

"No, it is really amazing. Not using drugs and doing this much in a month. Originally the start is the most difficult step. In the future, it will alright if you gradually build upon that feeling."

Kang-Joon did not seek to console her, being sincere. Although Choi Gina showed a confused expression as if there was nothing amazing about rolling a baseball with psychokinesis, Kang-Joon carried a soothing smile.

"Ms. Gina is certainly talented at this, and is doing quite well. You don't have to show that sort of face."

“Thank you...”

Choi Gina who had become crestfallen recovered a little vigor hearing Kang-Joon words. While Jiwon was watching all that trembling with excitement.

“W-What about me? Please tell me to do something! I bet I can do it well!”

Burning with confidence with an expression overflowing with enthusiasm. Although enthusiasm in excess is bad in many ways, it is much better than not having any.

Chapter 34 - Battle Station (2)

Kang-Joon instructed the members on the basics first, all of them had their own strengths and were engrossed in making the most of their capabilities. And, when four days had elapsed and they could be considered as proper teammates, a call from Seol Yeong arrived.

[Mr. Kang-Joon, it would be better to guarantee they can work as a team before starting working properly, right?]

“Yeah. That’s why they are going through the basics for the time being...”

[What about going to a Battle Station?]

“When you say Battle Station...”

Although Kang-Joon had heard of it a few times most of the information was still unfamiliar to him. However, Seol Yeong slowly explained.

Initially a technology of United States’ military, with the technology of using augmented reality for combat being made open to the public, Battle Stations were appearing all over the world like mushrooms after a summer rain.

Battle Station was a place which adapted the augmented reality system for the use in battles. Although the facility fees were very expensive, there was nothing like it regarding a Hunter Team combat training. There were no risks involved, and it enabled for the development of teamwork figuring out what the problems might be firsthand, therefore, in many ways, it was a place Teams which were giving their first steps as well as those who were just starting to establish their teamwork came to ‘rehearse’ a live battle.

Few full-fledged Battle Stations were created in Korea, with three in Seoul and a single one in Busan — A total of four. However, looking at their increasing momentum these facilities would

certainly continue to multiply.

In the end, it was not that much different from a game, and although as of now only Hunters and management officials could make use of it due the high cost, as that phase gradually passed it was more than capable of being used as a source of entertainment.

[Originally, the cost to use was extremely expensive and too much of a burden, however, didn't we receive the president's award this time?]

“Yes.”

[So, instead of receiving additional benefits that were all the same I've been looking through everything, and thought being given free-use to a Battle Station seemed like the most beneficial thing. Then I requested it and the government officials allowed.]

“Really?”

[Un, because of that, from now on we can use the Battle Station whenever we please.]

They didn't receive a simple reward that would lose its value, and neither did Seol Yeong try to obtain many things at once — it was a fair compensation. Although it was Kang-Joon who had done all the work, Seol Yeong was able to make good use of the opportunity, obtaining a very sizeable privilege.

Monsters made real through the augmented reality would appear in front of one's eyes, and those who went in would have no problems vanquishing them using the fake devices utilized in the Battle Station.

Kang-Joon arrived in the Battle Station's location situated in Seoul outskirts bringing all his party.

“The world is really moving forward...”

The 20-something young man who had to mature too early could not help letting out an amazed voice seeing the enormous Battle

Station building.

More than receiving any substantial benefits or being granted a certificate, in some form Kang-Joon felt he had completed his job.

“Wow... This is what you were saying...”

“Unnie! What is this?”

Choi Gina and Jiwon seeing the sophisticated interior had their mouths wide open unable to close it. Equipment they had never seen before in their lives, vast interior, and, most of all, with the enormous influx of capital the Battle Station’s building itself was enormous, spanning the equivalent of multiple baseball fields to begin with.

“Ms. Aran has already visited a Battle Station?”

“There was a facility in the Temple. Although was smaller than this.”

Seo Aran expression wasn’t that of someone coming across something for the first time. An employee approached them not long later, guiding them somewhere after talking with Kang-Joon for a short time. Heading to the Battle Room Seol Yeong had reserved.

“Is it fun, unnie?”

“It hurt slightly in the beginning.”

Hearing one could be hurt Gina, Kang-Joon, and Jiwon all tilted their heads.

“Can we be injured while fighting with holograms?”

To Gina inquiry Aran still replied with the same impassive expression.

“A Battle Room is an installation made with Cube Crystals as base.”

“Ah...”

“And as such uses mechanically generated force fields. It is a little complicated to say...”

Aran said simply.

“You can think of it as an artificial implementation of a psychokinesis attack.”

“Then... that means...”

“If you are hit, the pain is genuine.”

“!”

“It is alright. It is not enough to kill someone.”

With Aran unconcerned words Gina’s complexion became white with fear.

“Before we went through the enhanced body procedure, there were children whose arms or wrists were fractured... That was about it. There will be no problems once you got the hang of it.”

Hearing Aran’s indifferent words Gina was almost worrying herself to death. Then she set her sight at Kang-Joon.

“About this...”

“Make sure to not be hit and you will be fine.”

However, Kang-Joon was an even more unprincipled bastard.

While Jiwon had no interest in those words or whether it would hurt or not, simply listening to the people’s vigorous shouts every time they would pass through each Battle Rooms with shining eyes.

The Battle Room was divided in a control room and main room. The monsters were controlled from the control room, and the main room was the place where the confrontation would take place.

“This an C-Class Room, able of summoning monsters between the F and C Rank. Today you are allowed to use it freely until

nighttime. Please keep in mind all the warnings stated, and feel free to call me if there is any emergency or problem.”

After that the employee went back having explained the process of how to operate and use everything one time. The main room interior was quite broad, roughly an 230m² wide space. Although nothing had appeared in view yet, thanks to the dark brown walls and the ceiling’s white lights the surroundings were quite pleasing to the eye. Kang-Joon read the warnings conspicuously attached to the control room’s walls slowly.

[Attention! Do not use Aether devices used in real battles!]

[This facility has been made of Cube alloy and as such is very solid, but is not invulnerable against intentional damage.]

[Usage by Awakens and Mutants above B Rank is prohibited.]

[All damage to the facility and/or property responsibility as well as compensation are to be shouldered by the customer.]

If there was a single mistake was to be made it was self-explanatory what sort of unimaginable compensation this super-advanced facility would ask for. Kang-Joon stared at the three people with a serious expression.

“Do not get careless even if all we are doing is practicing, and especially you Jiwon, be careful not to smash anything here.”

“Yes big brother!”

Each individual received fake Devices and Armour Coats. And, after the equipment was operated as it was explained to Kang-Joon, the three entered the main room. Kang-Joon equipped a headset, speaking in the microphone afterwards.

“Can you guys hear me well?”

[Yes.]

Everyone nodded their heads. In the screen what sort of monsters as well how many could be summoned appeared, and the

three personnel who had entered at the moment were indicated. Kang-Joon had no attraction to games in the first place, and he didn't have many memories of having interacted with them either, doing nothing except stare at the messages that appeared in front of his eyes without reaction.

[Battle Station System operating]

[The Room's interior is equipped with the latest Energy Scanner.]

[Hunters and Knight classes deal combat damage when hitting the enemy with the practicing Devices.]

[Mutants and Awakens deal damage measuring the energy amount when hitting the enemy with their special abilities or brutal force.]

[This is a C-Class Room. There is a risk using special-abilities or physical force exceeding the B Rank doing critical damage to this installation.]

[Set the difficulty level]

[Easy]

[Normal]

[Hard]

[Very Hard]

[HardCore]

[Hell (Must have the Station Master's certification)]

Deciding the difficulty level was very important. Kang-Joon looked at the screen which had appeared on the huge monitor, hesitating for a moment.

"If it's too easy there will be no fun."

[Manager oppa?]

Gina's frightened voice was heard.

Kang-Joon pressed the [Hard] button forgetting the fact his words were heard by everyone.

[Hard Mode]

[Armour Coat's shield value decreased by 30%]

[Shield regeneration decreased by 30%]

[Irrespective of the Shield remainder, if attacked by 5 enemy hits the Armour Coat will be deemed destroyed.]

[Enemies' movements are 0.5 faster, and health is increased by 50%.]

[Enemies' movements will be added with a component of unpredictability]

[Select the summoned monster's type and numbers.]

In front of Kang-Joon's eyes a list of numerous monsters together with their 3D images appeared in an instant. Monsters from F to the C Rank were lined up, including Boss Monsters too. Kang-Joon's selection so far was displayed to the people in the augmented reality main room.

Seo Aran watched the flashing 'Hard Mode' notifications inside the room expressionless.

"I don't think this is a good idea."

"What is this..."

Jiwon didn't know what was going to happen, releasing light blue and dense mist from its body. At the same time Kang-Joon was browsing through the list choosing one. With his voice echoing inside the room.

[I don't have much to expect after all. It is just the start, so let's take it easy.]

Choi Gina couldn't become part of the fighting force now nor in the immediate future. And as such, the ones engaging in the fight

would be Aran and Jiwon.

[It would be too stressful if many of them were summoned, no? A little bigger fellow will do.]

-Jiing!

A portal opened in the air, and from there something's appearance was slowly revealed.

-Stomp!

As that Monster walked forth the ground shaking was very much real. And although it was nothing but a construction using mechanical force fields, as soon as the real monster appeared in front of their eyes the fact was there was only one thing the team members could think of.

‘Is that really fake?’

The monster in front of their eyes was tremendously realistic. And Aran too had completely no idea the augmented reality technology had developed to this extent. Despite not wearing any equipment that hologram monster was represented with such details one could see the creases in its skin.

“Ah, so this is the american technology...”

Kang-Joon too watched that sight from the other side of the tempered-glass, releasing a surprised sound.

Excluding Kang-Joon — due to augmented reality a message was displayed in front of everyone eyes.

[Hard Mode]

[F Rank Boss]

[Daytime Dokkaebi]

In front of their eyes — with a red skin, reaching a height of approximately four meters, and carrying a giant wooden club in its right hand — stood a giant. Aran observed the practicing Device,

releasing a breath of relief. No Aether needed to run through it, and it was no different from a decorative sword with matching weight only.

Even if it was a F Rank, a boss was summoned suddenly.

[Is this much too easy?]

Kang-Joon was saying that sort of senseless words quietly.

“Grrrrrraaaa!”

The Dokkaebi released an odd cry, lunging at them. Gina’s body froze, unsure of whether to head somewhere and bring forth The Magical Girl’s — certainly overkill — power, Seo Aran gritted her teeth rushing at the Dokkaebi,

“Wow! It’s very big!”

while Jiwon was in the middle of admiring it.

The result was a crushing defeat.

“...”

“Ah, my head is ringing...”

“If only I had done did it for a little bit longer!”

Seo Aran put up a fight, and Jiwon layered its Core Weapon around its body pouncing at the daytime Dokkaebi. It succeed at times landing some effective hits in place, while Aran squeezed in the enemy gaps making a few bold attacks.

However, Jiwon’s erratic advances were the problem. Jiwon pounced randomly crossing through Aran’s movements path, hesitating for a moment. As such, the Dokkaebi wasted no time and scored three consecutive hits, destroying the Armour Coat. Eliminating Jiwon with the fourth attack delivered.

And in Aran’s case, although she avoided the attacks well she moved in the gaps and blind-spots in order to continuously attack,

and due to that the aggro transferred to Choi Gina, who was still in her body, and with a couple hits the sluggish Choi Gina was eliminated.

And although Seo Aran, who was the last one remaining, avoided the Dokkaebi's attacks quite skillfully she overtaxed herself in the end searching for attack points and hits, receiving continuous attacks after being knocked down and was eliminated.

Hence, it was a complete wipe-out.

If it was an actual battle Choi Gina could have used the Avatar, and Seo Aran could have used the body reinforcement and endured longer, while Jiwon could have used its Mutant abilities fully and they could have finished it somehow.

On contrary, the Battle Simulation was in some aspects more difficult than a real battle, however, it was just practice. And as practice one had to be perfect so they could be more than perfect in a real battle. Like that, Kang-Joon felt it valuable to increase their practice intensity a little.

At the end of the battle, the Dokkaebi remaining HP hovered at roughly 30%, most of the damage dealing done by Jiwon. It was based simply on the estimated energy amount, and in fact Jiwon's attack ability was very impressive. Kang-Joon didn't criticize the 3 people.

[Actual battle data results assembled, abilities averages arranged.]

Kang-Joon looked at the statistics of the personnel inside the room displayed on the monitor, thinking it indeed seemed like a real game. Through the console the shield values and attack power could be adjusted to match their actual capabilities.

[Setting each personnel capabilities in accordance to their actual ones. If there is no abnormality, this data will be used as default value henceforth.]

[Player 1 – Choi Gina]

[Attack Power : 10] [Shield : 100] [Health : 10] [Special Attack : 1]

[Player 2 – Seo Aran]

[Attack Power : 20] [Shield : 100] [Health : 200]

[Player 1 – Jiwon]

[Attack Power : 40] [Shield : 100] [Health : 100]

In Seo Aran's case, taking into account she would be able to endure many hits thanks to the body reinforcement the health numerical value was raised above the default, and, in Jiwon's case, it was deduced through the average measurement of the Core weapon energy values.

Of course, If one was to use high-quality Aether Devices or Armour Coats the attack power and shield values would increase, those were values one could depend entirely. The practice Devices basic damage is fixed at 10, that meant Choi Gina's attack power was, in other words, the weapon attack power itself.

In Seo Aran's case, because of the muscle strength she had the damage was boosted.

At a Battle Station it was possible to obtain quantified values like this. And Kang-Joon suddenly realized this facility was a considerable step forward in various aspects.

An actual battle wasn't a world where one would perform an attack with 40 attack power and would deal 40 damage, in many ways, as it was, it was close to a fun way of grasping the basics. Most of all, Kang-Joon attention was in Gina's special statistic which no one else had.

'Don't tell me a small bit of psychokinesis was used in that situation?'

He was caught off guard unable of understanding anything, at the room Choi Gina, even while doing something else, used a very

small amount of psychokinesis which was detected and expressed here as a quantified value. Although Choi Gina was currently in the brink of a mental breakdown, as Kang-Joon thought there was no need to think like that at all.

In this brief moment, Choi Gina herself had achieved a small progress.

“Let’s try it 3 more times.”

At the Hard Mode the amount of impact wasn’t that big, giving only an impact sufficient enough to cause one’s brain to buzz slightly. Kang-Joon didn’t make any rash changes, summoning the same monster once again.

Naturally, the remainder 3 times results were also defeats.

Chapter 35 - Battle Station (3)

[Battle Results – All dead, Defeat]

[Player 1 – Choi Gina : Death 4min 44sec]

[Player 2 – Seo Aran : Death 9min 21sec]

[Player 3 – Jiwon : Death 3min 30sec]

[Remaining enemies : Daytime Dokkaebi (Remaining HP 7%)]

[Battle Rating F Rank]

It was able to analyze and issue a post-evaluation about who caused how much damage, or the circumstances regarding one's death. In many ways the Battle Station was a place in which the simulations did their money worth. Everyone was downcast with the consecutive defeats. However, Kang-Joon didn't comment anything.

“We should eat something first.”

This place was where new Hunter Teams did their training, so as soon as they came out the Battle Room they met people who were aware of Seo Aran's circumstances, sharing some light greetings every now and then.

“Wow! Aran! It's been a while!”

“Yeah.”

“How are you?”

“I am well.”

“Oh, ah... Have you eaten?”

“I am going now.”

“Ah... Yeah, have a nice meal! Let's meet again later!”

Most of the people they met were glad only to depart with Aran's dry responses while others simply nodded their heads as greeting,

with the clear-cut responses and the lack of willingness in continuing the conversations displayed all too openly the majority of those were glad not have seeing each other in a long time ended disgruntled.

Everyone watched the cute child there and there were those who greeted it looking as if they found it endearing, and Jiwon, likewise, diligently greeted them.

“Hi!”

Of course, Hero Management was attracting all attention of the management industry these days like a second sun rising in the sky, and those who were aware of the news of a newly recruited Mutant’s presence there roughly guessed Jiwon’s identity.

The treatment given to Mutants was already less than ideal, and if it was a child involved in the murder cases in a Mutant breakout incident then, it was no surprise to be treated like the chicken by the cow — with sheer indifference.

Seo Aran was a familiar face among the Knights, while in Choi Kang-Joon’s case the rumours had more than enough time to spread to the people who were well-informed by now, and the people who had heard of Choi Kang-Joon could roughly guess Jiwon’s circumstances.

‘Then who is she?’

What those who passed by, specially the management officials, were paying attention to was Choi Gina. Thinking that if Choi Kang-Joon’s cast consisted of a Templar aspirant and a runaway Mutant, Choi Gina as well might be a talented Hunter worth keeping track of. However, as it was, looking at her she seemed simply like a woman in her mid twenties with distinguished and beautiful features.

Besides, seeing their crestfallen expressions, one could guess without difficulty the colossal failure in the Battle Room. This is a

Battle Station, and making a mistake here meant nothing other than death in a battle, so it was often followed by the managements strong reprimands and sometimes issuing of penalties.

In the end, even if private they were a company after all, and the Hunters here were training under their managers' surveillance.

The managements' trend those days was to run new Teams at the Battle Stations for some days if short, or a few week if long to build up teamwork. The majority which was then ordered to go out working in the field. it was, in various aspects, the speed of roasting a bean with lightning.

There were many cases where 'training' was the equivalent of being imprisoned in the Room, and skipping meals was but a matter of course. There were occasionally cases of Freelancer Hunters which were able to summon winds, clouds and rain before the contract becoming no different from slaves after them.

As such, Hunters were, in their majority, almost half-dead.

That was also the same to Kang Ju-Yeon who was in the middle of a meal in the food court.

"Haa... I hate this."

For 3 whole days, she was training hard together with her new team members while getting only the minimum necessary sleep. Working hard with D Rank Hard Mode Clear as goal, she — together with a Knight and a single Awaken — was part of a three-man Team, training under a manager's instructions.

A Knight, who had physical strength much more outstanding than others, felt this much fatigue, the additional fatigue the awaken had was clear to see.

He was at his wit's end, and without even going through 3 spoonfuls ran to the restroom in order to throw up.

Until the contract was signed no matter what they did she was no

different from a queen, now the manager only had eyes for his watch as if he was apprehensive.

If the expected amount of training wasn't fulfilled it was, to the team leader, the same as a failure.

The down-payment was received, so in the future she had to move in accordance with the management's commands, and regardless of much she earned the plain truth was the management had the initiative. However she was a headstrong person, and could endure this much.

And that was when she found a familiar face in the food court.

‘Seo Aran?’

A man, one quite pretty young kid which she couldn't tell whether was a boy or girl, followed by Seo Aran and another woman. Kang Ju-Yeon was able to know at once that adult man was Hero Management's manager from those widespread rumours. Although they were seated quite far away, she eavesdropped in their conversation concentrating her senses.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Side-dishes too.”

“Can I eat a Tonkatsu?”

“Tomato pasta.”

“Okay... Tonkatsu and pasta with side-dishes. Jiwon, should we order you a junior set?”

“Noooo! Something big, would it be bad if I eat something big?”

“I get it. Something big.”

Kang-Joon rose from the seat finishing the tally.

‘What the, they came here to fool around?’

Looking as they were they were no different from people who had come to visit a department store's food court. The manager

standing in front of Kang Ju-Yeon's eyes continued talking without care.

“Finish your meal, take a 3 minutes rest then come to the room immediately after. Ms. Ju-Yeon, you are indeed doing good so far, but can you keep in mind your overeagerness in the future? Move with the idea of helping you teammates first once in a while. And Mr. Jikwon isn't it too problematic to be scared now? It is augmented reality after all, what are you scared of? If it's this way right now, what about in a real battle then?”

A Manager in the early thirties ate casually talking at length of work matters. Even if considered a prospect, she was still nothing but a C Rank Knight, her potential was seen by the company and selected — nothing but that. She would grow during the 5-year contract, and, because of that, would end providing more Energy Crystals as commission than the company's initial down-payment.

The allure of money was ruthless, therefore, before she was employed in real battles she was pushed very hard. Although Kang Ju-Yeon was doing well, it seemed the Knight that came together with her, Kim Jikwon, was being subjected to a very severe talk.

‘Then why don't you try being hit once!’

Fake or not, due to the operating psychokinesis the amount of impact transferred was not ordinary. Enough for a common person to break out in a thousand screams.

However Kang Ju-Yeon didn't took out that words, having her meal quietly. Rather than the manager's nonsense she had no use hearing to, she was more curious about what the rumors' Choi Kang-Joon was saying.

“Eat first, and after a cup of coffee we start again.”

“Yes.”

‘What?’

Despite depending on the rank selected, the Battle Station's fee

could, basically, easily jump over \$750 USD per hour. As such, an hour in the Battle Station was, in other words, a huge amount of money. However, Choi Kang-Joon, the one from the rumours, had an attitude as if he was coming to a tour, not saying a single word about work or related things.

“The diced radish Kimchi[3] here is really well done.”

Talking of nothing but trivial things. Without even dreaming Hero Management had obtained a free-use pass, Kang Ju-Yeon at that carefreeness felt an inscrutable rage boiling inside.

She was angry, unable to let it loose somehow looking at the manager in front of her, a glare in her eyes.

“As such, starting next time you should be a little more contained...”

“We understand so eat quickly. On contrary, the meal time is probably taking even longer.”

That was all Kang Ju-Yeon could say.

Kang-Joon took out his business talk after the meal, while drinking coffee sitting at a café. While Jiwon was happily having a milk-shake. In the café, the people who could drink coffee were only officials, including managers, but not Hunters.

“Why are you all so dispirited like this?”

Aran had a serious expression, and Gina was dropping her head forward.

“I think there isn’t anything I can help so...”

“I am not sure what I have to do.”

Although Seo Aran had once visited a Battle Simulation, as it was known, her teamwork was lacking. The type that, instead of cooperating with others grasped things alone, shouldering everything. Jiwon was a child who didn’t know properly what a

fight was, and although Choi Gina was someone who could crush everything with her overwhelming ability, at the moment she could at most roll a — single — baseball about.

“Losing is something natural. Nothing to fret about.”

Kang-Joon spoke to them like that.

“When I became a beginner Hunter. After I joined a Team all I did was sightseeing for half a year.”

“Really...?”

“How to fight. What fighting is. A process is necessary to get to know that sort of thing. In my case, if I made a mistake my life would be gone for, so I prepared like that, but with Battle Stations there is no need to repeat it, the training you are going through is exactly like a real battle. I mean, as of now you guys haven’t worked together once and were dropped in a real battle, if you had won I would have no words left to say.”

Kang-Joon didn’t have many expectations, and like that, on contrary, the performance they had shown was, frankly speaking, beyond his expectations. Although Seo Aran’s teamwork was unsatisfactory she could endure facing off a Boss for 9 minutes, and Jiwon’s Core Weapon was very powerful. Also, Choi Gina, despite being in the middle of battling, was little by little gaining enlightenment in the Half-Trance.

Kang-Joon looked at each of the three people’s faces unhurried, setting up their actions’ guidelines one at time.

“Ms. Gina should be alright to keep your focus on being able to use the half-Trance during the battle like now. Jiwon you have a tendency of rushing in thoughtlessly, the best attack timing is precisely right after the enemy attacks. IF you have confidence you will break the enemy’s attack rhythm attack. Usually you should aim at the enemy rear side. Ms. Aran... well.”

Aran, as soon as Kang-Joon mentioned herself, placed both hands

on her knees, staring at him nervously.

“You have an excessive tendency of not getting hit.”

“...Not being hit is a good thing, no?”

“If you was alone it would be like that.”

Kang-Joon indicated Jiwon and Gina.

“Ms. Aran doesn’t pay attention whether there is something in the enemy’s attacks trajectories.”

Seo Aran possessed an extremely individualistic battle style.

“At times, there is moments Ms. Aran must use the body reinforcement and endure the enemy’s attacks hits. I am talking of when a friend is on the attack’s path. However, when the enemy advanced Ms. Aran’s first action was to aggressively attack after avoid the enemy’s attacks. Keep in mind. When Hunting, a Knight’s purpose isn’t bringing the enemy down.”

Kang-Joon advised carefully.

“Tie the enemy’s feet, and keep track of the enemy’s attacks pushing them back with that. If you have to avoid in that situation take into account the Team’s overall situation, then carry it out. A Knight’s actions main objective is blocking the enemy’s movements while staying alive.”

Even though Aran generally survived until the end, that was because of Aran’s good movements and not-so-ethical abandon, completely disregarding her team members well-being.

If we are to talk in game terms, she was a Tank which didn’t carry a shield and whose interest was placed only in slicing the enemy, but that couldn’t do that well. As a matter of fact, if Aran had moved in harmony with Jiwon’s advances they would have Cleared it before.

However, Kang-Joon didn’t say that. Kang-Joon didn’t think pointing out flaws and harsh reviews made for better people.

Those were excellent in eliminating mistakes.

But would make the subject passive instead. And there was no good reason to use such person, in hunting or anywhere else.

“Everyone should have gotten a sense of what sort of problems each one possess through this four experiences. Now go and try to fix the problems we realized with those yourselves.”

“Un!”

“Well... I will give it a try then.”

Seo Aran didn't say anything with a hard expression.

As they departed the café in the Station and returned to the Room, when Jiwon and Gina went in, Seo Aran stood in front blankly, calling out to Kang-Joon.

“Mr. Manager.”

“Ah, yes. Ms. Aran.”

Aran stared at Kang-Joon with a serious expression. Aran's impression was quite cold, therefore, it certainly appeared like a glare. However, Aran stared at Kang-Joon, dropping her head slightly afterwards.

“I am sorry for disappointing you.”

Aran lifted her head, and, after speaking like that, passed by Kang-Joon entering the Room with a 'swoosh'.

Kang-Joon looked at that sort of Aran, scratching the back of head.

“You have not disappointed.”

There was no need to be disappointed about problems that were expected.

Translation's Notes:

Banchan is a collective name for small side dishes served along

with cooked rice in Korean cuisine. As the Korean language does not distinguish between singular and plural grammatically, the word is used for both one such dish or all of them combined. Banchan are set in the middle of the table to be shared. At the center of the table is the secondary main course.

Tonkatsu pork cutlet, is a Japanese dish which consists of a breaded, deep-fried pork cutlet. The two main types are fillet and loin.

Chapter 36 - Battle Station (4)

Aran was more physically outstanding than Kang-Joon thought, and the teamwork problem was already something acknowledged. Only anticipated problems were revealed, and just those needed to be fixed.

However, Aran, having her flaws pointed out by Kang-Joon, was overwhelmed by a feeling of shame.

Cooperation was difficult to her since the past. Adapting one's attitude to someone is itself difficult, and in fighting specially it was even more so.

Even if she formed a temporary Team, even if she needed to bring down four opponents alone in a tournament, she wouldn't try to do anything through cooperation or collaboration. Although it was a known problem, it wasn't fixed in the slightest. Speaking precisely she never really felt a reason to.

However, it was a little different now.

Wanting to receive Kang-Joon's approval, while confronting the fake monster she realized. Although being eliminated was as it was just an elimination, if it was real battle those people would have genuinely died.

Because of her, people would die.

Kang-Joon progressed through those four simulations to at the same time induce them to realize it by themselves. Their own shortcomings.

And Aran understood. Because she avoided the enemy attacks Jiwon was beaten, shield dispelled and Armour Coat destroyed until being eliminated. She knew she shouldn't do it but at same time couldn't hold back the bad habits imprinted in her body. If it was an actual battle Jiwon's head would have burst open, and Gina would have disappeared in a pool of blood with that sort of attacks.

She was a Knight, and, as such, could receive that sort of attacks even without an Armour Coat.

She had to stop avoiding and endure.

She had to be hit when she had to.

[C'mon, start again.]

Kang-Joon's voice rang inside the main room, and the virtual monster was summoned once again. Aran held the practice Device in hand while looking at the slowly materializing daytime Dokkaebi[Recap]. Jiwon, and Gina too were the same.

The 5, 6, and 7th attempts ended in failure.

When the 8th turn arrived, Seo Aran alone was eliminated and the daytime Dokkaebi was Cleared. The finishing blow was a jumping strike by Jiwon with its Core weapon to the Boss's head. Jiwon — body fairly flexible — moved nimbly like a cat, and was able to do a fantastic critical attack.

By the time it became 11pm they were able to clear the F Rank Boss without a single person being eliminated. Choi Gina grew fairly familiar with the Half-Trance, proactively making use of psychokinesis — becoming able to slow down the enemy's movements to a certain degree. Although the one who appeared the least, Choi Gina was the one with the fastest growth.

In many ways, achieving a Clear in just a single day was itself something Kang-Joon specially admired.

[Battle result – All Survived – Clear]

[Finishing blow Player 3 – Jiwon]

[Clear time 4:33 sec]

[Battle rating B Rank]

Kang-Joon looked the Clear message satisfactorily, speaking against the microphone.

“You have worked hard. Let’s return for today and rest.”

Right now it was nothing but the first step, from here on the had to slowly advance forward, training like it was an everyday routine. At the moment all they did was Clear a Hard Mode F Rank Boss and nothing else.

“Starting tomorrow we will try dealing with the majority of the F Rank monsters.”

Today they were already worn out with exhaustion, as soon as they heard they had to do it again tomorrow everyone’s expression blackened. Kang-Joon was also a manager after all, and had no such thoughts about running this team members leisurely. Above of all, these people were Hero Management’s sole hunting Team.

And, as such, had to become sufficient to be able to be placed in battle quickly.

The battle Station possessed very outstanding effects in combat training, and Kang-Joon decided it certainly was an efficient method. Most of all, that kind of Battle Station free-use pass possessed substantial value.

Kang-Joon organized a training schedule. Briefly, training at the Battle Station during the day, and, at night, doing individual training for 3 hours. Choi Gina was ordered to become perfectly familiar with the Half-Trance, while Seo Aran and Jiwon were ordered to be able to be more precise with the pitching machine sudden attacks and the Core Weapon’s use, respectively.

Kang-Joon supervised that three’s training process. On contrary, to them it was hard to understand why Kang-Joon hadn’t complained of any of them.

Most of all, Jiwon followed Kang-Joon dutifully, doing what was told obediently. Jiwon knew without Kang-Joon it would have been soaking in dissolving solution right now or sent to a

protection facility — something much worse than the lifestyle it had now. All of them had a reason to, Hero Management aside, follow Kang-Joon.

Seol Yeong was asked about some sort of jurisdiction zones as well as emergency actions groups dispatching, but she shook her head; it was still not time to Kang-Joon to be deployed in a real battle. Seol Yeong too didn't want to lose precious Hunter in vain trusting Kang-Joon's words.

And, when the training had been maintained for about a week, Choi Gina came to see Kang-Joon during the Half-Trance training.

Kang-Joon was supervising Jiwon's Core Weapon training.

“Oppa.”

“Yes. Ms. Gina.”

“I... will do that.”

““That’?”

“Administering the drug.”

Although she did indeed develop to a certain extent, Choi-Gina training had yet to become a big help. If all her psychokinesis did was slow the opponents' movements its level would, at best, be below the F Rank lower limit. With a higher ranked psychokinesis, if the Magical Girl was summoned Choi Gina could, in the worst case, crush the enemy in pieces with pure psychokinesis.

Choi Gina could see with her eyes Aran and Jiwon's abilities improvements increasing daily, while she couldn't give any sort of help, feeling stifled alone disillusioned with herself. There was an ingrained guilt problem, and at times it seemed she couldn't endure.

After all, they had to be deployed to an actual battle quickly to earn money, and Choi Gina had to absorb a vast quantity of Aether if she wanted to restore her reduced lifespan.

“Are you talking about the OD-3 solution injection?”

“Yes.”

“Well... Then I will do the preparations immediately.”

The drug preparation was not overly complex. As soon as it was explained to Seol Yeong she — despite small concern — approved the expense. And presenting the ID card at the place where Energy Crystals solutions were used, some units of the OD-3 solution were purchased without difficulty.

And now,

Choi Gina was watching Kang-Joon who was preparing the solutions dosages. Having already gleaned in the Half-Trance to a certain degree, it was a situation where, if she were to take the drug, she would advance several steps immediately.

“T-Then Oppa will do it yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Is that really okay?”

“Professional surgery places don’t have this sort of thing. Even at the time with Chloe I did the injections directly.”

In other words, those words were no different from saying in the world no one but Kang-Joon had carried out this injection. The others were in the middle of training, and there was no one but Kang-Joon and Gina in the apartment complex upper level rooms.

“Then, in this process little to no preparation is indeed needed, however...”

The injection solution prepared by Kang-Joon was shining with a dim milky white color. As soon as Choi Gina thought of that fluorescent substance going through her neck she suddenly felt afraid.

“It really isn’t dangerous?”

“Awakens would be fine even swallowing a gourd of Aether. You won’t die with this sort of thing. Although people like me would... We will have to prepare something.”

“What is it?”

“Well...”

Kang-Joon impression was difficult as if embarrassed, speaking.

“This, the first time is accompanied by unfamiliar pain, so... a little embarrassing situation can occur.”

“‘Embarrassing situation’?”

“Involuntary excretion discharge might occur.”

Nothing but roundabout words, no different from saying one might end up dirtying their pants.

“What is that?”

“It’s an enema.”

“...”

“...”

The two gazed at each other for a moment in silence. Inside Choi Gina couldn’t tell what was this after all — A difficult and embarrassing situation or sexual harassment.

“You aren’t lying?”

“Once you give it a try you will understand whether it is a lie or not.”

Choi Gina took over the enema looking as if she was about to cry.

“I will excuse myself. Please contact me when everything is settled.”

“...Okay.”

Kang-Joon went out outside, and Gina stared at the thing held in

her hand blankly feeling she had to this after all. Jiwon and Aran had to endure a great amount of pain in the process which they earned their powers — She knew that well. On the other hand, Choi Gina didn't experience an ounce of pain in the process of awakening her abilities. Now the ones dashing ahead were the two, and she still had not become completely helpful.

Although she couldn't know what the pain would be, she thought she had to endure it at all costs. She didn't want to become someone's burden because she couldn't endure such small thing.

After the big event(?) was settled, Choi Gina was lying face down on a yoga mat with an expression mixed humiliation and shyness.

“Can I start?”

“Yes.”

“Don't move no matter what.”

Kang-Joon lifted Gina's long hair. Kang-Joon was no doctor, and naturally didn't have things like professional knowledge. When giving injection to Chloe in the past, on contrary, he was the one most afraid.

‘Here? Is it here?’

‘Uh, stab around the place?’

‘Isn't this dangerous?’

‘Just apply it where you want.’

‘Will this really be okay?’

‘If it doesn't I will die anyway.’

‘Hey...’

Kang-Joon really placed the injection as had been said. Knights, Mutants, and, of course, Awakens as well — after awakening — could be simply thought as having bodies very different from

ordinary people's. And, due to the many experiences he already had, Kang-Joon knew this injection's side-effects were vomiting and vertigo and nothing else.

Originally the OD-3 was a reinforcement drug used for overdrive. Only now, the injection's location was different. Kang-Joon touched Gina's nape, selecting the injection place.

"Well... It's around here."

"Don't be afraid... Don't be afraid..."

"Here is probably the right place."

"Do not guess this sort of thing..."

Regardless of what was said or done Kang-Joon slowly pushed the syringe's needle.

"Aeung..."

Whether it was by the frightening feeling as it entered Gina's limbs contracted and her body shook tremblingly. After the milky solution, caused by none other than the fluorescent substance, was fully injected Kang-Joon pulled out the injection.

"Haa, Haa... Haa..."

Gina's whole body went limp. She dropped down like a wet towel, breathing in and out repeatedly with shallow, almost unnoticeable breaths. Kang-Joon's part came to an end with this. Gina was splayed around as if dead, therefore, despite experienced, Kang-Joon suddenly felt afraid.

What if the OD-3 cervical vertebrae injection was only effective on those with unique constitutions like Chloe?

Kang-Joon felt a chill on his spine.

"M-Ms. Gina?"

If that was confirmed they would have made a fatal mistake, as it was Kang-Joon would have to flee immediately or obediently face

the illegal police investigation that would most likely follow.

“D-Did you die?”

Kang-Joon spouted nonsense because of his nervousness. Slowly, although — seeing by her back very weak rise and fall — the breathing stabilized, Gina’s eyes had no focus, and saliva was flowing from her mouth.

When,

-Flash!

Gina’s body, eyes blurred as they were, slowly floated in the air. And from inside those eyes themselves white light started to burst forth. Kang-Joon remembered this sight.

‘Success!’

Gina’s body, now approximately 30 centimeters above the ground, was floating. And, like that, Choi Gina slowly opened her mouth.

“I need to... pee...”

“...”

As she was still not skilled with the Half-Trance, she was in an half-sleep and half-awake state at the moment.

And was sleep-talking.

Gina floated in the air, slowly sailing through the air moving towards the bathroom’s direction. It certainly was a rarely seen sight, and Kang-Joon let out a breath of relief without knowing how to express what was this in the end.

“What a mess.”

As soon as Gina opened the door, planning to take off her pants in the air, Kang-Joon kindly closed the bathroom door. Once she got used to this perfect yet momentary trance feeling Gina would raise multiple levels in a moment, able to take some sort of actions

becoming fully helpful.

30 minutes later,

“Ueeeeek!”

Choi Gina, due to aftereffects caused by the drug, was continuously throwing up her insides contents. Coming out after washing her mouth roughly before going in once again, Choi Gina vomited until nothing but bitter water emerged from her stomach.

“Uu... Uuuu... I am dizzy...”

“Sit down quietly and you will feel better.”

“Y-Yes Sir...”

Choi Gina flopped in the sofa wearing a near-death rigid expression. Right now she felt like throwing up her stomach, dizzy, and probably couldn't properly see anything shown in front of her eyes.

“Still... I think I know... what sort of feeling it is...”

“Once you give it a try some more times you will be able to understand it perfectly.”

“Eh?”

Hearing ‘some more times’ Choi Gina was caught of guard, releasing a high-pitched voice.

“Ms. Gina, don't tell me you thought you would be able to grasp it in a single time?”

Kang-Joon opened the storage case, displaying inside at least 10 syringes carrying OD-3 solution inside.

“T-this isn't what you talked about...”

“If I said you had to do it multiple times, you certainly wouldn't do it.”

“I was tricked once again...”

Gina had made a great decision of braving through hardship once, but due to Kang-Joon’s lack of explanation it all became a joke.

“If we are to put all these together this is USD \$10,000 of easily spoilt solution, so you must use them all. If you give up in the middle, all of them will be charged from Ms.Gina, so don’t think of turning tail half-way.”

“What?! No way...”

Gina, despite disoriented, rose from the sofa startled. Pressing her temples firmly collapsing in the sofa once again soon afterwards.

Chapter 37 - Suspicious Dance Party (1)

“Can’t we use it for a different purpose...?”

“The OD-3 solution is for Awaken exclusive use only, and the Awakens at Hero Management are just Ms. Gina alone.”

Choi Gina had to make use of that injection’s solution completely. Making her wonder whether she wouldn’t really die if she were to be injected with all that many.

“And this is an Aether based drug after all. When injected with you will absorb Aether as result, your powers’ level rising as whole too whenever you do so — it would be killing two birds with one stone.”

“Uuu... T-That is too much...”

Kang-Joon, whether he could understand Gina’s inner turmoil, was smiling from ear to ear. While Jiwon and Aran, who had finished their individual trainings and returned back up, watched the beaming Choi Kang-Joon and Gina on the verge of tears while laying face down on the sofa, puzzled.

“Haa, today too was a very productive day.”

Choi Kang-Joon smiled, speaking like that. Seasoned people with Hunter experience each had an eccentric side, and Choi Kang-Joon was not an exception.

After that the schedule changed a little. Choi Gina ended now receiving the Half-Trance training using the OD-3 solution at night. And despite having no choice but falling in a half-corpse state every time going through it, Kang-Joon said if they did this training sparingly, on contrary, there would be no effects, being better to get down with it swiftly.

As such, naturally there were many times where Choi Gina and Kang-Joon were the only two present at night. Although Choi Gina couldn’t conceal her anxiety as it became night, chewing her

fingernails and more, she did not refuse the procedure in the end. And the drug training's effects did truly show themselves.

Choi Gina became able to — amidst battle — slow the enemy's movements to a degree noticeable to the naked eye. Although incapable of killing or defeating the enemy, it was sufficient to make each creature sluggish under its imposing pressure. And with only that much Choi Gina already became sufficient help.

‘Is she a genius?’

Kang-Joon remembered even Chloe couldn't grasp the Half-Trance at this speed. And even without that, Choi Gina was someone who mowed monsters down while cosplaying as a magical girl having no idea what Avatar even was. Her status as a genius already established.

Now they were working hard in order to Clear a C Rank Dungeon Hard Mode Boss. They had already become able to Clear a typical monster wave — with some difficulty.

This time their levels weren't appropriate, and at the Hard Mode they couldn't help facing complete annihilation putting up a desperate struggle.

The summoned monster was a giant spider that, with its agile movements and deadly poison, was a monster complicated to deal with in many ways. Choi Gina trembled at the start, saying there wasn't absolutely any chance she could do it. Disliking insects from the outset, it was fortunate she didn't pass out upon the giant insect sight.

And, at the seventh wipe-out,

“I can't think of anything at all...”

Once bitten by its attacks a couple times one would enter a poisoned state, being eliminated directly. In addition, because of its increased intelligence, it attacked Choi Gina who was standing at the rear first. Seo Aran dealt with the enemy's attacks, and —

despite fighting back and evading at times — was eliminated being hit by its giant scythe-like legs sweeps and chops, and continuous biting attacks, while Jiwon didn't need to be said. Aran spoke, looking at Kang-Joon fixedly.

“Show us a demonstration once.”

“Huh? Demonstration?”

“Yes.”

Despite Aran firm expression there were fresh signs of a strong yearn .

“It is not something I can't do, but... Even if you saw what I do there will be little gain. I don't think it would be able to give any helping tips in particular, and...”

“Show it.”

Aran cut it off clearly, speaking like that. Kang-Joon and Aran interlocking gazes for a moment. The two, Jiwon and Gina, tilted their heads wondering why it had suddenly came to that, but were unaware of what meaning that could possibly have. Until Kang-Joon nodded his head.

“Well, sure.”

Even though he didn't know what they could learn Kang-Joon wore the practice equipment, entering the main room. Whether Seo Aran knew the operation method, her voice heard from the control room soon afterwards.

[I will summon it then.]

“Alright.”

[Hey Aran, just a moment.]

[Difficulty Level Change]

[Hardcore]

[Even being hit by a single attack will destroy the Armour Coat]

[Damage can not be inflicted without attacking weak points.]

[Enemy's Health increased by 500%]

[Enemy's Movement is two times faster.]

“M-Ms. Gina?”

[Hang in there Oppa!]

Choi Gina cried out with joy. A single action and the difficulty level was raised to the highest available. Mischief was probably only part of it, a feeling of revenge for all of Kang-Joon's harassment present.

‘Was I too severe?’

If Choi Gina, who was usually kind, was like that it meant they hadn't built up anything.

[Hardcore Mode]

[C Rank Boss]

[Giant Black Widow]

A huge black spider appeared,

-ktatatata!

And with a sound pounced headed to Kang-Joon with a tremendously outrageous speed.

“This really seems real...”

Seeing the spider's charge Kang-Joon broke out in genuine cold sweat. However, separated from that, Kang-Joon slipped, diving under the incoming spider's stomach, striking at the spider's underbelly and escaping.

[Weakpoint attack!]

[50 damage inflicted.]

All things aside, Kang-Joon was a stubborn person with a competitive personality.

Moments later,

“What is this...”

Choi Gina was taking in the sight beyond the glass with a stunned expression.

“Wow! Hyung is really the best!”

Jiwon was jumping all over the place, ecstatic.

“...”

Seo Aran was unable to take off her sight forgetting to say anything. A message appearing on the screen.

[Battle Results – Solo Play Clear]

[Clear Time 14:33 secs]

[Battle Rating PERFECT]

Kang-Joon, who scored the Clear and in fact wasn't hit a single time, was sweating because of the non-stop rolling in the floor and the cold sweat brought by avoiding the enemy attacks. While, Jiwon aside, the other two words disappeared, watching Kang-Joon come out the main room as if he was a god.

No mind-boggling ability was employed and neither were superhuman movements displayed. Only changing places before the enemy attacked, always burrowing at its blind spots dishing out critical attacks without resting time. There was no psychokinesis, Core Weapon, or outstanding vitality based on an enhanced body. The task was simply accomplished with his body and the practice device he carried, nothing else.

The black widow which had no blind spots, moved quickly, and possessed completely unavoidable attacks when dealing with them found itself at loss facing Kang-Joon, unable to do anything. Making them curious of whether they were dealing with the same monster.

Despite seeing it with their eyes everyone was unable to

understand what happened in the last fourteen minutes.

“Hyung! Here!”

“Ah, thanks.”

Jiwon brought a dripping wet towel and Kang-Joon wiped his sweat staring at the dumbfounded duo. Grinning.

“Simple, right?”

Aran and Gina thought at the same time.

‘I want to beat you!’

After drinking water, Kang-Joon laughed carelessly looking at Choi Gina and Aran rotting expressions.

“I am just kidding. Well... As I did this is, in the end, like a sort of experience based reaction. And, as you saw, not something one can teach.”

Kang-Joon didn't proactively judge what he had to do in which situation and act. Moments to that sort of rational acting and thinking weren't given during battle. When the enemy attack comes, which direction to head into or which gap to aim for wasn't judged by the brain but body.

Like that battle was, in other words, no different from an ingrained habit or subconscious reflex, and in order to cultivate those hundreds and dozen of hundreds of continuous battles were needed. And, as such, Kang-Joon hadn't given a demonstration until now.

Despite having seen it they couldn't imitate. Seo Aran, Choi Gina, and, of course, Jiwon simply thought Kang-Joon was incredible, but held no thoughts about being able of imitating that sort of movement. With movements that didn't go beyond a human's limits, Kang-Joon avoided the spider's two times faster attacks.

At the same time, to Seo Aran, Kang-Joon surviving until now was an incredible feat. Seo Aran knew Kang-Joon was a pure

human — a Pure Hunter — a while ago. And was, like that, curious about what Kang-Joon experienced in order to obtain that sort of quick combat reflexes in the end.

Once you think of it, it was something irrational.

Were it those which became Mutants, Awakens, and Knights 10 years ago, even if they had to do the same Hardcore Mode as now they would be able to blast through it in a couple half-assed attacks. Without even needing to use the training devices. Maria, even attacking only with her reinforced body punches and kicks, would be able to inflict much more damage.

However, Kang-Joon took a very long 14 minutes, fighting while relying in the equipment. If the device was broken, it would be the same as having no means of combat.

It could be said others completed the course riding on a Porsche and Kang-Joon had to ride alongside on a light-weight car unlike them. Kang-Joon achieved combat ability was great at first sight, and at the same time shabby.

Aran felt she could indistinctively understand why Kang-Joon had quit the Hunter life. Defined limits, he had experienced his limits' boundaries. However, Kang-Joon was chuckling.

Nowadays it was very common to address those who survived 'strong'.

However, those who survived in the Hunter industry for 10 years as humans were difficult to categorize simply under a lone word.

“Then, should we start again?”

“Yeah!”

Jiwon answered energetically, and everyone advanced, going into the room with serious expressions. Kang-Joon's voice ringing in the speakers.

[I have also done it, so everyone should give Hardcore a try for

today too.]

“!”

Kang-Joon's character was to pay back as much as he experienced.

[Then, you can do it.]

The Hardcore Mode black widow was soon summoned, and it wasn't a full 1 minute until complete destruction.

The members realized themselves that Choi Kang-Joon was a monster after all.

“Currently the Team progressed enough to be fully deployed to a D Rank Core situation. Once they become fully familiar with the equipment's usage going so far as subduing a C Rank Core would probably not be unreasonable. All three of them are more than able of doing a person's share.”

“So that is how it is! Mr. Kang-Joon is doing an excellent work as always.”

Kang-Joon reported for work at the company after a long while talking with Seol Yeong. The members were currently training at the Battle Station, and it was decided when the allotted time was over they would return together brought by Team Leader Song. Although originally it was expected for a manager to be stuck together at all times, Hero Management, as it was known, lacked manpower.

Regardless of how easygoing they did things the company is a company, and checking the Hunter Team current status through the manager was natural. And, after hearing the report Seol Yeong took out the main point.

“There is an event hosted by the Management Association at this time.”

“Un.”

“It is easier if you think of it as just a simple party. And if two guests want information is sometimes shared. An excellent place to meet a lot of people. One might even be able to be entrusted with managing other large management declining branches.”

“Yes.”

“What about Mr. Kang-Joon heading there together with me and getting to know some people?”

Management was, after all, a personal connection business, and the more people known the better. Seol Yeong herself was determined to develop Kang-Joon. Kang-Joon’s ability to get things done was more outstanding than any among those she had seen, and with that degree she believed — without a doubt — he would become a big-shot incomparable with herself.

As such, if he learned slowly from here on out it would be beneficial to her and Kang-Joon alike. And Kang-Joon too had no reason to recuse.

” Sounds good.”

“The party is the day after tomorrow, so come together with me that day. The team members will be handled by Team Leader Song like today. Ah right, do you have any...”

Tuxedo? was what she intended to ask, but Seol Yeong closed her mouth. Kang-Joon was at this moment wearing brown denim pants, sneakers and a polo shirt. Besides, since the very first time, Kang-Joon had never — even a single time — shown his appearance adorning a suit.

“I have a suit. Well, I haven’t worn it, but...”

However, this was Kang-Joon who seemed to show no major concern to clothing, Seol Yeong didn’t find it very reliable. After all that was a place where, at times, formality was more important than what they had to say, and that formality was revealed though

one's outfit. Seol Yeong gazed at Kang-Joon intently, speaking as if making a big decision.

“I will buy some real clothes for this.”

“Sorry?”

“Mr. Kang-Joon worked hard so far and as you know couldn't receive a bonus. This will be my present then.”

“Aren't you squandering the company funds?”

“But it is a hundred percent private expense, though?”

“In any case, you should know the president's money is the company's money.”

“Why are you so annoyingly obstinate even though I proposed to buy it? Shut it and follow!”

-Smack

The slippery Kang-Joon was swatted in the back by Seol Yeong in the end.

Chapter 38 - Suspicious Dance Party (2)

Department stores luxury goods shops were an unfamiliar place to Kang-Joon. And, although he had a lot of money too, seeing a single suit's asking price numbering at thousand of dollars had he shaking his head.

“Disgustingly expensive.”

Circling through the luxury goods stores together with Seol Yeong Kang-Joon summarized those numerous ‘superior products’ in a few words simply. While Seol Yeong laughed, full of enthusiasm.

“Those are strange words coming from a person who used 10 thousand dollars in a single injection set without blinking an eye. Aren't all the suits here right now all cheaper than a low-end Armour Coat?”

Seol Yeong's words too were right.

“Battle equipment which safeguards one's life and a luxury whose only good are showing-off and self-satisfaction — the way they are measured themselves is different.”

Kang-Joon was a utilitarian person who spent money on items whose use were worth its value. An efficiency worth ten thousand dollars was expected from a 10 thousand dollars Device, however, Kang-Joon didn't think luxurious clothes' matched the expectation they were granted with.

“Even then, the reality is most significant battle products these days are all, in their vast majority, being branded as luxury and status goods too.”

Well-know battling products had performance values lower than one would actually expect. It could be said their price was obtained mainly through the brand itself. Suit or hunting Device, when capital was involved, this sort of irrationality would be formed of

one form or the other.

“Armour Coat parts are inserted into suits nowadays, with quite a few products sporting weak protective effects. Even the one with lowest price exceeding 100 thousand dollars. The best protective effects said to vary between the F and D rank. Selling well among high ranked individuals.”

Armour Coats’ uses weren’t exclusive to hunting only, and were slowly being applied even in everyday life. However, if one wants to possess proper defensive effects they would have to wear and get used to quite a heavy and not so easy to carry weight.

In fact, Shield Bracelets — an top-end hunting Device — were also sold more to rich people than Hunters.

The more a person had the more afraid of death they were. And, looking at it from a certain angle, it was a natural matter. Kang-Joon summarized that sort of worldly matters very concisely.

“That is insane.”

“It is!”

Seol Yeong agreed enthusiastically, the two glancing at each other smiling. Those weren’t Devices intended to be sold to simple Hunters.

The two entered inside a luxury goods store to select a suit according with their original aim. Seol Yeong reasonably picked suits likely to match Kang-Joon. And when they had bought everything from the light-grey tuxedo, dress shirt, shoes and neckties to cufflinks Kang-Joon was dead tired. As they wandered through the luxury store — for what was in fact a couple of hours — Seol Yeong’s attitude, agonizing about whether to buy things time and time again as if she couldn’t bring herself to, trying this and that, trying everything once again, and throwing things away only to try them one more time later, left Kang-Joon aghast.

By the time the shopping was over the sun was already down.

“Isn’t this working overtime?”

“Someone who manages a Hunter Team 24 hours a day intends to quibble over overtime work now?”

Seol Yeong laughed leaving Kang-Joon unable say anything. The two of them carrying shop bags.

“We have bought everything, so we should try them on one time.”

“Where?”

“In my house. It will give us privacy too.”

“...”

“It seemed like you looked at me with a very rude gaze just now...”

“I have no idea what you talking about...”

Although Seol Yeong scowled at him, Kang-Joon feigned ignorance. Seol Yeong’s house was a officetel in Gangnam Station. A two-story officetel building too big to live alone, and very well-maintained. And despite faintly aware Seol Yeong was a well-off person, living alone in a big and sophisticated house like this was quite surprising to Kang-Joon too.

The sink didn’t have the messiness of when meals were frequently made, and the feeling of bleakness as a whole was strong. Kang-Joon looked at everything, and all he could think of was ‘luxurious’.

‘So Ms. President lives in a very expensive house with expensive furnishings.’

Kang-Joon’s appreciation was brief. His aesthetics were sorely low.

“I will be in the living room, so change clothes and then come out. Even though we tried them on, we have to try the full set-up. And come out wearing the shoes too.”

Seol Yeong pushed Kang-Joon in a room together with the bags, and stayed in the living room.

Kang-Joon changed his clothes according with Seol Yeong's words, suddenly realizing the place he came into was Seol Yeong's bedroom. No underwear were sprawled about, and the bedclothes, pillows, and cosmetics were all arranged neatly too. Whether a person was called to clean or she cleaned it herself, Seol Yeong clearly seemed to have a very organized personality.

And, while dutifully changing his clothes, Kang-Joon suddenly became aware of a certain smell's trace.

“...”

It was not an aromatic smell, and, despite similarly sticking to one's nose, its smell was slightly dry like dust or sand. Both of which were impossible in this tidy house, the exquisite smell's resonance alerting Kang-Joon's nerves.

Kang-Joon knew well this smell. The smell exuded by a refined Core; And a refined Core meant, in turn, a drug made with a Core as base. The smell's source was the drawer below the dresser, prompting Kang-Joon to stare straight at it collecting his gaze shortly after.

There was no need to be concerned with others' personal life. Kang-Joon changed his clothes slowly — His thoughts wandering at times.

‘No, well, it isn't my business... Uh, but... Haa. I don't know.’

“Mr. Kang-Joon? Am I imagining things or it looks like you are way too slow to change clothes? Shouldn't it be proper to come out quickly when going in a woman's bedroom?”

“Ah, I am changing right now.”

Seol Yeong mischievous voice reached his ear across the door, and Kang-Joon came out the door after hurriedly changing clothes. Seol Yeong, seeing Kang-Joon's appearance, scanned him from top

to bottom — and then from bottom to top — as if doing an evaluation.

“Why did you wear your clothes half-assedly like this?”

Without even arranging his dress shirt tail properly Kang-Joon looked like a hooligan.

“Take off your coat.”

Seol Yeong, after taking off Kang-Joon’s jacket, arranged Kang-Joon’s dress shirt ends. Kang-Joon intended to say that it wasn’t appropriate, but because of Seol Yeong’s natural movements he simply remained stiff in place. Inserting his dress shirt tails in his pants waist Seol Yeong was startled all of a sudden, shrinking back slightly.

“Uh...”

“Did you say something?”

“N-No... Nothing...”

Seol Yeong, because of her brightly blushing face, bowed her head down.

‘Oh my gosh! Why is this child’s body hard like this!’

Having lived in battle Kang-Joon’s body fat percentage was, naturally, extremely low, and Kang-Joon’s body was hard like a rock. Touching it, briefly as it was, had his entire body’s muscles pulsation transmitted to her hand.

Thus, on contrary, Seol Yeong was surprised by it.

‘How bold, did I go crazy? I must have lost my mind.’

Seol Yeong chanted heavenly mantras within her mind, finishing adjusting Kang-Joon’s clothes. While Kang-Joon stared at the absent-minded Seol Yeong, with his right hand holding a necktie.

“You don’t know how to tie a necktie?”

“Nope.”

“Don’t... be proud of that.”

Seol Yeong tied the necktie to Kang-Joon’s neck deftly. Mumbling as if to take focus away of her red flushing face.

“Don’t ask. I will not say a thing.”

Saying she wouldn’t answer even if asked why a woman who lived alone knew how to tie a necktie.

“I didn’t plan to.”

Seol Yeong released a breath of relief hearing Kang-Joon’s words.

“You can really live off your glib tongue.”

“We have to live anyway we can. It is a tough world, after all.”

They mumbled to each other in the time the necktie was tied, and, after wearing the jacket and filling in the buttons, Seol Yeong stepped back three steps looking at Kang-Joon one more time.

“You look good.”

It was not empty praises, Kang-Joon matched the clothes well as if he could become a model. Tall and attractively height, toned body, and precisely wide broad shoulders — A well matched bearing that would have whoever saw turn their head once.

“Come and wear it just like this the day after tomorrow. Alright?”

“Un.”

“And this.”

Seol Yeong passed Kang-Joon a watch case. It was a considerably luxurious silver watch that, despite seemingly not new, had more than enough elegance.

“It’s been a long time, but it doesn’t have an old design, and there wouldn’t be issues even if a young person like Mr. Kang-Joon were to wear it.”

Kang-Joon wore the watch in his left arm. And the time

apparently didn't need to be readjusted.

“The suit was given as bonus, and the watch is a token of gratitude.”

“Yes, thank you. I like it.”

Kang-Joon wasn't curious about the clock's origin, and Seol Yeong didn't take the trouble to explain. This simple watch held some meaning, and Seol Yeong wanted to give it to Kang-Joon. Just something that held importance in the past and nothing else, neither of them brought out any unnecessary emotions.

“Then off you go. Or you can stay if you want to eat before going.”

“If Ms. President is alright with it I will trouble you this time.”

“But, I am not a good cook. I grew up pampered.”

Seol Yeong smiled mischievously speaking like that.

“So what do you do in order to eat? ”

“A personal chef comes and cooks when I call. He is Shilla Hotel's head cook, and my personal chef in his spare time.”

“This is the rich people's world...”

As Kang-Joon spoke like that, Seol Yeong smiled radiantly.

“That is obviously a lie.”

Pumping her fist tightly while doing so.

“This time I got him too.”

“...”

It was a completely unexpected timing, so Kang-Joon felt he really was had this time. However, it was not an unpleasant thing, doing nothing but smiling while caught off guard.

“I only lie when necessary, you know? There wasn't any reason to that just now.”

“Isn’t lying when you need it worse? Despite being a lie, lying without any second intentions is not so bad.”

Seeing Seol Yeong speaking like a adult Kang-Joon couldn’t help laughing.

“Come to think of it, I heard Mr. Kang-Joon’s cooking is pretty good...”

“...”

Seol Yeong’s eyes brightened.

“Don’t I have to know what sort of food my members are eating?”

With Seol Yeong’s unreasonable words, Kang-Joon gazed at Seol Yeong intently, releasing a sigh.

“I can’t do anything if you don’t have ingredients.”

“There are many in the fridge!”

Seol Yeong decided to push the cooking to the guest whom just stopped by. In many ways, Seol Yeong also had an odd side like Kang-Joon.

Two days later — Wednesday, in a hotel in Seoul.

Kang-Joon arrived at the hotel’s lobby together with Seol Yeong. Kang-Joon’s outfit was the one Seol Yeong hand-picked, and Seol Yeong was wearing a black evening dress with a brown shawl covering her shoulders. Her hair was elegantly tied in a french pleat fixed uniquely with a binyeo hairpin. Unlike ordinary times, where she was frequently without make up, Seol Yeong was thorough in many aspects today.

As someone who enjoyed wearing sneakers she wore black wedge heels matching the dress she came with. Even then, seeing her walk skillfully, Seol Yeong didn’t look as if she was particularly unfamiliar with this sort of outfit.

On contrary, Kang-Joon thought that this was closer to Seol Yeong's real appearance. Although not as approachable as ordinary times, this appearance displayed at this moment a natural elegance as if the clothes she wore were the right one's for her body.

Parting her red lips, Seol Yeong smiled at Kang-Joon.

"You are not nervous, right?"

"All we are doing is meeting people in there."

"Good. Then let's go."

The day wore on, and quite a lot of people were just now arriving at the party grounds and lobby.

"This party is funded with each of the 3 big managements' investment. Honestly, even going in thoughtlessly and only eating delicious food would be sufficient."

Although she spoke playfully, if it was for that sort of purpose there was no reason to come here from the start. Sharing a few greetings with some acquaintances they met, and boarding the elevator they arrived at the banquet hall where many people were already present.

Delicate classical music was flowing, and everyone's figures were dressed up to their best with suit and dresses. However, as Kang-Joon looked, it was a little strange.

"Including tuxedos like that, do every people these days own dresses like those at home?"

"These people might have rented it. Even if they come with suits it doesn't really mean anything either."

The women's dresses and the men's suits looked luxurious even with a single glance. And the age group was fairly high. Seeing Kang-Joon looking slightly out of the loop Seol Yeong let out a small laugh.

"Eh, did I not say this was executive rank party?"

“Executive rank?”

“Yes, originally there is nobody from the management companies general staff; Only those above executive rank are able to attend. About three to five people, at most, comes per management.”

“I am ordinary employee though.”

“In that case you are an executive starting today.”

Hearing Seol Yeong playful words Kang-Joon was dumbfounded.